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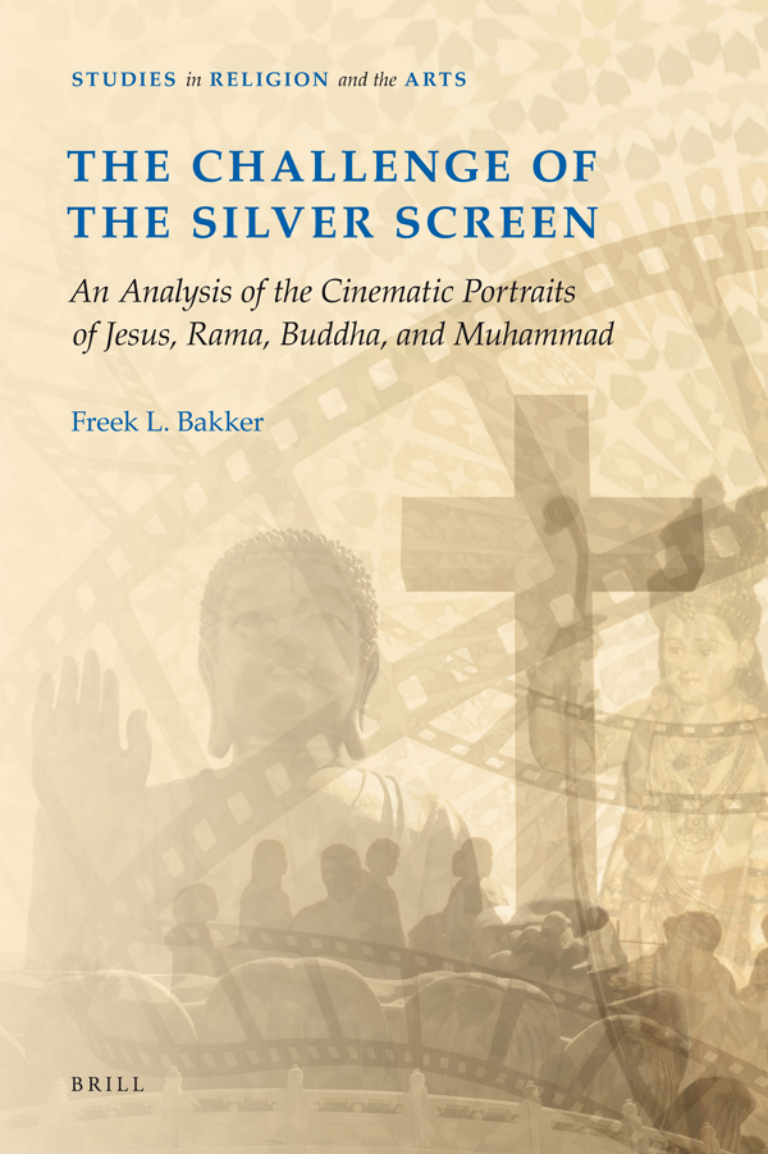
THE CHALLENGE OF THE SILVER SCREEN

An Analysis of the Cinematic Portraits of Jesus, Rama, Buddha, and Muhammad

Freek L. Bakker



BRILL

The Challenge of the Silver Screen

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The Challenge of the Silver Screen

An Analysis of the Cinematic Portraits of Jesus, Rama, Buddha and Muhammad

By
Freek L. Bakker

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FOREWORD

This book is the result of a project that began in August 2003. My research proved to be an interesting journey through four of the world's great religions. I saw new, remarkable and often also beautiful images, and I also encountered attractive and sometimes complicated theories. Meanwhile, the journey yielded unexpected new insights into all four of these religions. Those with a reputation for being strict turned out to be more flexible while those reputed to be tolerant proved to be decidedly less so. Meanwhile, a broad spectrum developed of images depicting how the divine, how God, was expressed in human form. The journey became a surprise that I gladly welcomed.

I would like to thank the directors of Centre IIMO and the Department of Theology of the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University for giving me the opportunity to conduct this research and for helping me to find the necessary funding. I would also like to thank Henry Jansen for improving the English text—a task that was not always easy. Finally, I am grateful to both Regine Reincke and Maarten Frieswijk for the assistance they provided me on behalf of the publisher.

Freek L. Bakker

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On 1 November 1895 the German brothers Max and Emil Skladanowsky screened their first short films to a paying public in Berlin, to be followed almost two months later by the Lumière brothers in Paris. And they were not the only ones. In fact, in the same year a number of people showed films without any knowledge that others were doing so as well. In the United States short movies were shown to individual spectators, but all had to be discontinued because of their audience's lack of interest. The Skladanowsky brothers and the Lumière brothers screened their films to larger audiences and were successful in generating interest (Bordwell and Thompson: 401; Sadoul: 18–19). The era of film was born. Within two years, in 1897, the filmmakers discovered the possibility of attracting mass audiences through making films about Jesus. The era of the religious film had begun.

In the early years it was the Roman Catholic Church that initiated this coalescing of film and religion; the first film about Jesus, La Passion du Christ (The Passion of Christ), had been produced by the publishing house, La Bonne Presse, which had a Roman Catholic background. This film, made by Albert Kirchner, lasted only 5 minutes (Sadoul: 33–34; Bottomore; Baugh: 8). In the same year another film about Jesus was released and in January of the next year a third Jesus film appeared, most often referred to as The Passion Play of Oberammergau (Richard G. Hollaman, 1898), even though it was shot on the roof of the Grand Central Palace hotel in New York. All these films became box-office successes, so making Jesus films proved to be big business (Tatum: 4). From now on, religious motives were joined by financial ones. In 1902, the possibility of showing miracles on the silver screen added yet another motive for producing these films. Again, scenes of Jesus walking on the sea attracted large audiences to the film theatres.[1]

[1] In Passion and Death of Christ (Ferdinand Zecca and Lucien Nonguet, 1902), later included in The Life and the Passion of Jesus Christ produced by Lucien Nonguet in 1905.

Films are much more expensive to produce than books or paintings (Monaco: 39–48; 228–229), so filmmakers were always preoccupied with obtaining funding for their projects. If they did not find people willing to invest in their projects, they were cancelled. In fact, many producers were dependent on those willing to invest money in their projects. Some, of course, had and have sufficient funds to finance their own productions, such as Mel Gibson (b. 1956) who financed his PASSION OF THE CHRIST (2004) himself, thus obtaining complete freedom in his production.

Investors were naturally interested in a return on their investment and, for this reason, filmmakers were careful to produce films that would become box-office successes. So the decision to produce a particular film was made not only by the church or the filmmaker but also by investors.

Consequently, the producers were compelled to make films that were agreeable to a large section of the audience. Furthermore, they did their utmost to prevent religious authorities from evaluating their movies negatively. It is well known that Cecile Blount DeMille (1881–1959) took measures to counter anticipated negative reactions to his film when he shot THE KING OF KINGS in 1927:

> He shrewdly retained as advisor the Jesuit priest, Daniel A. Lord, one of those responsible for the U.S. Motion Production Code, and in addition held daily prayers during production led by representatives of various religious groups, including Islam and Buddhism. He also had mass celebrated on the set each morning, insisting that it was "like a constant benediction on our work." Clearly the daily Catholic liturgy was also a good insurance policy against future attacks on the film. (Baugh: 12)

For the same reason DeMille selected a somewhat older actor to play the role of Jesus. A 'fatherly' representation of the Lord would certainly leave a better impression with the audience than someone of Jesus' actual age.[2] We see the same occurring in later Jesus films. Franco Zeffirelli (b. 1923) and Mel Gibson also did their utmost to obtain the Vatican's recommendation for their movies. Zeffirelli was successful, since Pope Paul VI (1897–1978) advised people in his sermon on Palm Sunday 1977 to see his JESUS OF NAZARETH (1977), which was to be broadcast on television that very same evening and the following week. Gibson also claimed to have received a recommendation by the pope at that time, John Paul II (1920–2005), but his claim was not confirmed

[2] For more detail see: Tatum: 49–50.

by the Vatican (Zwick: 102; *Catholic News Service*, January 19, 2004). In fact, it was Pasolini's Jesus film[3] that over time became the most popular among many theologians belonging to the Roman Catholic Church and the mainline Protestant churches (Langkau: 22–23), although Zeffirelli's movie scored high as well (Tatum: 114–117, 223). The Protestant theologians of Evangelical background seem to prefer The Jesus Film by John Heyman (1979).

Another aspect that the producers had to take into account was the accusation that their films were anti-Semitic. This accusation emerged almost every time a new film about Jesus was announced, leading the filmmakers to do their utmost to prevent the impression that it was the Jewish people who had ultimately condemned Jesus to death. In his The King of Kings, for example, DeMille introduced a scene not found in the Bible in which the high priest Caiaphas falls to his knees and prays to God that God would hold only him, and not his people, guilty for the death of Jesus. Very often, the films produced in the United States explicitly show Jesus' appearance before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate while omitting what had occurred shortly prior to that in the Sanhedrin, the highest council of the Jews. And if they do show the trial in the Sanhedrin, they make abundantly clear that there were also Jewish leaders who defended Jesus. Interestingly enough, it is a European picture, Pasolini's Jesus film, that has no problem depicting what took place in the Sanhedrin. This indicates the important position of the Jews in the United States, in particular in the world of cinema. This was completely different from the situation in Europe after World War Two.

The need to make box-office successes of their films compelled the producers to take the expectations and taste and preferences of their audiences into account. Because of the development of the American film industry, the audience of this country became the most important.

In the course of the development of film various countries took the lead successively. It was France that developed a huge film industry first and even became the most important in the world, but the devastation caused by the First World War dealt a major blow to this industry. The United States took the lead, especially after many film companies had moved to Hollywood on the country's west coast (Thompson and

[3] Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo (The Gospel according to St. Matthew, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964).

Bordwell: 56–57; Uricchio; Vasey: 53–58). Until almost the end of the 20th century it remained by far the world leader (Thompson and Bordwell: 644), but the Indian film industry gradually expanded over time and since the beginning of the 21st century has developed into the film industry releasing the largest number of films annually.[4] None of this means that the film industries of other countries were without any significance. France, Germany and at times Italy as well remained important, whereas in the second half of the 20th century the British film industry enjoyed a period of prosperity. The film industries of Japan and Egypt should not be undererestimated either. Film industries sometimes became important because a highly reputed filmmaker was making pictures that generated a great deal of discussion. One example is the Swedish film industry, which flourished as long as (Ernst) Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007) was releasing his films. Currently, the Spanish film industry is thriving because of the pictures produced by Pedro Almodovar (b. 1949).

This also had important effects, for a film released in the United States always had a greater chance of being distributed and seen all over the world than those produced in countries with small film industries. Therefore, filmmakers who wanted to be successful often tried their luck in America. Another consequence was that, if one wished to make box-office successes, he had to get his picture screened in the American film theatres, which meant that the taste and preferences of the American audience were of greater importance than those of other countries. A third effect was that investors gladly invested their money in American films because they offered the most chances for earning it back.

In their book *Savior on the Silver Screen* Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford and Guerric Debona OSB show that every Jesus film made in the United States is a reflection of the culture of the time in which it was released. To give some examples: Cecille B. DeMille's portrayal of Jesus reminds one of Jesus as portrayed in Sunday School: the first sequences show a soft-featured, welcoming man, bathed in light. He is the Jesus of our most intimate thoughts, who walks into our lives in

[4] In 2006 the USA produced 599 feature films, whereas India produced 1091 features. The figures of 2003 are 459 and 877 respectively ('US Entertainment Industry Market Statistics' on the website of the *Motion Picture Association of America*, a press release dated April 6, 2007 on the website of the *Press Information Bureau Government of India*, and the website of the Indian *Central Board of Film Certification*). For a breakdown of the distribution of Indian films all over the world in the course of recent decades see: Kaur and Sinha: 11–30; Mishra: 235–269.

a vision granted to us through a child's innocence and our personal encounter with the Saviour (Stern *et al.*: 53–54).

> Like devotional paintings, depicted in endless Christian churches in the West, and even postcards, DeMille's opening shot of Jesus convinces us that the Savior has only eyes for us. (Stern *et al.*: 54)

A completely different portrayal of Jesus is presented in Nicolas Ray's KING OF KINGS (1961). In this movie Jesus is more of a prophet than a redeemer. The Sermon of the Mount is the centre of the film, and the context of Jesus' life is the oppression exerted by the Roman occupiers. According to Stern *cum suis*, this film reflects the cruelties of the Nazis the American soldiers experienced during combat in World War Two (Stern *et al.*: 90).

> With nothing like the aura of DeMille's resurrected Jesus in color to guide them, Ray's risen Savior is literally invisible (with a haunting shadow) to the disciples and finally to us. Together we set out into the 1960s, which, after years of doubt and uncertainty, would ultimately declare God dead. (Stern *et al.*: 90–91)

Similarly, Stern, Jefford and Debona analyse various other films produced in the United States, and their conclusion seems very plausible: each Jesus film reflects the cultural context in which it was released.

So we may conclude that it was not only the religious authorities who determined the characteristics of the portrayals of Jesus—and as we will discover—nor the other important religious figures. In fact, there were four factors: the religious authorities, the filmmakers, the investors and the audience. Each exerted influence on the ultimate results projected onto the silver screen. In what follows in this present book we will see that this was important for all films made about religious individuals.

In addition to these four factors, there was a fifth that determined the portrayal of Jesus and other religious personalities: the technological possibilities the filmmakers could use in their time. The first Jesus film lasts only 5 minutes. LANKA DAHAN (Lanka Aflame, Dada Saheb Phalke, 1917), the first film about the Hindu divine hero Rama, is 36 minutes (Nair: 107), whereas DeMille's THE KING OF KINGS is already 112 minutes. This movie is the start of the development of the feature film, which usually lasts about 150 minutes. The first great feature among the movies discussed in the present study is another film about Rama, BHARAT MILAP (Meeting with Bharat, Vijay Bhatt, 1942).

The greatest stimulus for the development of feature films, however, was not the possibility of making longer movies but the introduc-

tion of sound in 1927. Up until then films consisted either solely of sequences of images without any textual explanation or simply a title, or these images were alternated with shots displaying text. Although these movies without soundtracks are called silent films, this does not necessarily means that it was silent in the movie theatres. There was often music and in many cases the texts projected onto the screen were read aloud. In the case of the Jesus films, those texts were frequently followed by short or sometimes longer sermons by a priest or some other individual.

A third important technological development was that the cameras became increasingly smaller and lighter. Batteries and the like made it easier to shoot outside and in areas without any electricity. New developments in lenses made it possible to shoot sharper images, including more beautiful close-ups. Furthermore, the skill of the filmmakers in making optimal use of the possibilities of daylight and artificial light increased. For a long time they were more competent in using artificial light and therefore preferred to shoot in studios. But later, especially since the 1950s, it became more common to shoot outside. Another reason for this was that the cameras had become smaller and more convenient to carry.

A further important development was the introduction of television. Television screens are much smaller than the silver screens in the cinemas. In the 1950s the film companies saw the broadcasting companies as rivals, since the film companies usually not only produced movies but also operated movie theatres. Attendance at movie theatres suffered greatly from the introduction of television, since many people preferred to see the films on TV, which was also free of charge of course. The film companies attempted to counteract the competition of television by making panoramic films that needed cinemas with wide screens, so that the image of the same film on TV was cut off on both sides, which, of course, diminished the value of broadcasting movies on television. So the audience needed to go to the movie theatres in order to see a movie in its full glory. Panoramic shots became more popular than close-ups.

All this was in vain, since the era of the 'talking heads'—one of the consequences of television screenings—had inevitably started. It proved impossible to counteract the popularity of television and in the 1970s many film companies decided to adjust to the requirements of television screening. Many films developed into television series. One of the

most important films discussed in the present book, Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN (1987–1988), was broadcasted as a weekly television series for a year and a half. Whereas in the beginning feature films had to be seen within one evening, thus never exceeding a length of three or at most four hours, they could later last more than 40 hours as, for example, Sagar's RAMAYAN. As a consequence, the movies discussed in the present volume vary widely in technical quality, length and nature.[5]

Although cinema exerted a great impact on the lives of millions of people, for a long time it was not considered a serious subject for academic exploration (De Bleeckere 1990: 48). According to many, cinema belonged to the world of entertainment and, in particular, a form of entertainment that was directed primarily at the common man. The pursuit of academic study was an activity conducted mostly by members of the cultural elite. Why should they study a phenomenon that was important for a social layer that many of them—of course not openly—looked down upon? Although a few within the world of religion saw great possibilities for the new medium, the great majority regarded cinema as a threat. In 1912 Pope Pius X (1835–1914) banned showing films depicting the Passion in church buildings (Acta Apostolica Sedis 1912). Many Protestants agreed with the negative attitude towards cinema. The famous 20th-century theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) declared that all attempts to depict Jesus were a catastrophe (Zwick: 108). Movie theatres were seen as competitors to the churches and movies were rejected because many of them stimulated sex and a more liberal lifestyle. The attitude of the churches started to change at the beginning of the 1930s, although it must not be forgotten that there were always many in the church, including many missionaries, who still saw great possibilities in movies and advocated a more open attitude (Bakker 2004: 312). On 29 June 1936 Pope Pius XI (1857–1939) issued an encyclical *Vigilanti Cura*, declaring that it was forbidden to see films that offended the beliefs and customs of Christianity. The implicit meaning of the encyclical, however, was that it was permitted to see all other movies. Consequently, the Roman Catholic Church took the lead in the censorship of films in the United States during the late 1930s.

[5] For the details of this development see: Thompson and Bordwell; for the changes caused by the introduction of TV see: Belton: 483–484; Hilmes: 466–468; Monaco: 232–261; 465–515.

The church implemented the encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* and in this way attempted to prevent all American moviegoers from seeing films offensive to the beliefs and customs of Christianity. Many Protestants supported this policy as well. Censorship remained very influential in the States up until the mid-1960s (Holloway: 117–118). The Roman Catholic Church was also active in censorship in Europe.

It does not come as any surprise that the great majority of theologians took the same attitude as other scholars, with the result that the phenomenon of cinema was not a subject of research among theologians (Lesch: 4–5). If they said anything at all, it was usually to warn against it. But in the 1960s the climate changed, although opposition continued to dominate for a long time in Protestant conservative circles in particular. The German Roman Catholic theologian and film expert Reinhold Zwick (b. 1954) surmises that it was the Bible comic strip that altered the view of these Protestants. Having previously considered it blasphemous to portray Jesus, they were now prepared to accept it as an instrument for the religious instruction of their children. So, in these circles the Jesus film stands within the tradition of the children's Bible (Zwick: 118–119). The present study will make clear that, with exception of the Hindus, the adherents of all religions experienced difficulty with films representing their leading religious personalities.

Although it is not possible to reduce this completely to the antagonism between church authorities and Christian theologians on the one hand and the representatives of the cinema world on the other, it can be observed that something similar also exists between those writing about movies and cinema and scholars conducting religious studies. The film reviewers and others reporting on the world of cinema almost never pay attention to the role of religious elements in movies, whereas most Christian theologians do not have any interest in the developments within cinema or in the message of films. This phenomenon is not confined to Christian theologians but also extends to many other scholars conducting research and publishing on religion, such as scholars active in the field of comparative religion or religious studies. It is only during the last two decades that scholars active in the area of theology and religious studies have been studying and publishing on film, but, as one of my fellow researchers in the area of film and religion stated, the books written on this subject still do not fill more than one small bookshelf. And if researchers do write on this topic, they frequently pay more attention to the phenomena accompanying the films they discuss than they do to the content of the movies themselves. Theologians are

eager to discuss, for example, the anti-Semitism of certain Jesus films rather than the messages brought by these films.[6]

Film reviewers and others interested in film and cinema, however, still seem to have a blind eye for the religious aspects in the movies they discuss. Consequently, many film reviewers miss the point of certain films (Dwyer 2006b: 284; Schrader: 5). A beautiful example is DEEWAAR (Wall), a famous Indian movie made by Yash Chopra in 1975 about two brothers, one of whom becomes a police constable and the other the leader of a criminal gang. In the end the policeman succeeds in arresting his brother. I read various analyses of this feature, but none discussed the role of the temple or other religious elements in the film. It seems that the reviewers took them for granted. Interestingly, the last meeting of the brothers before the elder brother is arrested is in a Hindu temple. The temple is a sanctuary, so the younger brother does not arrest his brother here. They meet, talk with each other and leave, each going his own way. This scene says much about the role religion plays in the film. Religion is apparently able to create space for a meeting impossible in society. Thus religion gives the two protagonists the opportunity to exchange their views and attitudes, at the same time showing their loyalty to their mother, and thus giving them the chance to continue to regard each other as brothers. Religion helps the one see the other as a fellow human being, even though he is the former's most prominent opponent in society. So religion encourages people to remain loyal to their family ties and to do justice to their humanity. This message, the result of an analysis including religion as one of the motivating backgrounds of human life, was, however, as far as I know, never included in any of the reviews of the movie. Thus the reviewers missed a possibly important part of what the filmmaker wished to say.

The purpose of this book is to discuss and analyse how important religious figures like Jesus, Rama, Buddha and Muhammad are represented in films. And it will come as no surprise that in the discussions and analyses religion will receive due attention.

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[6] An example is the issue the Dutch theological journal *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* devoted to Mel Gibson's THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST. Only one of the three authors wrote about the content and background of the movie; the other two discussed almost only its alleged anti-Semitic nature (*Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 44/4 (2004)), thus reflecting the debates in many ecclesiastical and theological magazines at the time.

It has already been stated that Jesus became a subject for film very early. In 1897, within two years after the beginning of the history of film, the first movie about Jesus was produced and within twenty years many others followed. Jesus films turned out to be box-office successes. Of course, this did not remain unnoticed elsewhere. Already in 1912 two Indian filmmakers also made a film about a popular religious figure, which attracted a large audience (Dwyer 2006a: 63). They were followed by others making films about popular religious individuals, the most successful being Dada Saheb Phalke (1870–1944), who produced the first film about Rama in 1917. In 1923 he also made the first film about Buddha, BUDDHADEV (Divine Buddha). Both films were followed by many others. The case of Muhammad, however, was different, since the first feature film about him was released in 1976; but even in this case the success of a certain Jesus film, JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR (Norman Jewison, 1973), was an important stimulus. It was this film's success, it is said, that motivated certain Muslims to finance and start the production of THE MESSAGE (Moustapha Akkad, 1976) (Bakker 2006: 78). THE MESSAGE became the first feature film about the prophet of Islam, but it was a strange film, since nowhere in the film is Muhammed on-screen. Only his staff and the head of his camel are seen.

The focus of this study is the images of the various religious individuals presented in the films that will be discussed. The presentation of the material will, however, be different. The number of the films about certain religious figures differs greatly. Jesus figures in more than 150 films (Langkau: 24). Rama is also seen in many films, but Buddha figures only in eleven and Muhammad in two. The problem with the Buddha films, moreover, is that it is very hard to obtain them. Only four were available; most of the others are lost, as far as I know. A selection was made in the case of Rama: the five most important movies about him will be analysed. With Jesus, however, it will not be enough to analyse a selection, for in that case the number of films that do not receive attention would be too large. Therefore another procedure will be followed in which the emphasis will be on reviewing and analysing certain types or genres of Jesus films. Thereafter, attention will be paid to the images of the most important films. But this will be done in only a limited way because otherwise the chapter on Jesus will become too extensive.

In our analysis attention will be paid to the influence of the religious authorities, the filmmakers, the investors, the audience and the technology. They were, as explained above, the five factors determining the

ultimate results projected on to the silver screen. The position of the religious authorities in particular will be considered.

The structure of the study is as follows. Each chapter will start with an introduction delineating the film history of the religious figure the chapter will discuss. The introduction will also explain which films will be considered and analysed. The reason for selecting the films is usually because it was widely seen, but sometimes there are other grounds for choosing a picture. If there are such reasons for choosing a certain film, this will be explained of course. The following section will present the background, the content and—if possible—the reception of the selected pictures. Hereafter, an analysis will be given focusing on the portrayal of the religious individual discussed in the chapter. If more than one film is analysed, a comparison will be presented of the portraits offered in the various pictures. In the next section the traditional visual and philosophical or theological background of the individual concerned will be explored as well as the question of the extent to which the films followed or tried to correct or change the image presented by tradition. If necessary, the attitude of the religion's adherents will be analysed. The chapter's final section will be devoted to a conclusive review showing the consequences of the emergence of one or more films depicting the individual for the religion to which he is so central and the portrayal they paint of this individual.

The great exception to this scheme is Jesus. We already stated above that around 150 films have been produced that depict Jesus in one way or another. Therefore, a larger number of pictures have been selected, i.e. sixteen. As a result, it is impossible to give summaries of the contents of these pictures. The focus will be on the portrayals the filmmakers presented and the approaches they followed. There will, furthermore, be a second chapter devoted to Jesus that will discuss the Jesus films made in non-Western contexts. This chapter will deal with the Indian Jesus films, a South African Jesus film and a Jesus film made by African-American Protestants. These films show an Indian Jesus or a black Jesus.

The order of the chapters follows the course of history. This means that Chapter Two will be about Jesus, since the first Jesus picture premiered in 1897. Chapter Three will deal with Rama, for the first Rama film was released in 1917. Buddha will be discussed in Chapter Four, because the first motion picture showing Buddha premiered in 1923.

Chapter Five will be about Muhammad. The first feature film narrating Muhammad's life story was released in 1976. That very same year the first film displaying an Indian Jesus premiered, which was followed by some others, but a second Muhammad feature was not released. Thus, it goes without saying that Muhammad will be dealt with in Chapter Five, whereas Chapter Six will be the second chapter devoted to Jesus.

The consequence of the emergence of film was that in almost all religions, but particularly in the ones with the largest followings, the ancient rules and opinions concerning the depiction of the incarnation of transcendence in the human world became a point of discussion or even a cause of fierce confrontation. During the 20th century the leaders—but also many common adherents of these religions—had to consider anew their positions. In some religions a new attitude regarding this matter took shape. The final chapter will discuss the various positions and their consequences for the development of these religions with regard to depicting individuals in whom the transcendent God appears. Furthermore, it will deal with the images presented in the films discussed in the present study and delineate the new attitudes developed with regard to the depiction of transcendence. One of the surprising discoveries will be that, in spite of the different attitudes—also among the various religions—all of them include groups who show some hesitation concerning concrete depictions. The popular idea that only Islam forbids films about its central religious individual will prove to be in need of modification. Thus, film is not something that is found only in the other religions nor is it something that does not have any preparatory development in Islam itself. Both hesitation and a need for pictorial representation of transcendence appear to be present in all the religions discussed in this study.

CHAPTER TWO

JESUS

The summer of 1897 saw the release of the first film about Jesus entitled La Passion du Christ (The Passion of Christ). This film was produced by Albert Kirchner for La Bonne Presse, a publishing house of Roman Catholic background. It was, in fact, a passion play performed by the Société Léar, which was probably an acting troupe, in a vacant lot in Paris that had been filmed. The film consisted of twelve scenes and lasted only five minutes. Unfortunately, all copies are lost. The only thing we know about the film is that 'Jesus' wore a crumpled white cotton shirt (Tatum: 2–3; Baugh: 8; Holloway: 48; Sadoul: 33–34). This first Jesus film was very successful, so La Bonne Presse decided to concentrate its activities on the production of movies (Holloway: 48).

In the first section of this chapter we will give a short overview of the history of Jesus films and explore the content of the sixteen most important Jesus biopics. This overview is not intended to be exhaustive, so it will present only highlights and the information we need to follow the discussion in the present chapter.[1] There is one exception to this, however—Son of Man, by Dennis Potter (1935–1994). This picture proved to be one of the key films in the history of Jesus films but was not discussed anywhere. We will therefore look at this film more elaborately in this overview. In the second section we will point to some differences between writing novels, composing theatre plays and making films. Furthermore, we will also look at the narration modes used in the Jesus films and focus on the various approaches the filmmakers followed when making these films. We will then explore the portrayal of Jesus in these films. It will become clear that amidst all the variety there is also a striking similarity. In the third section of this chapter we will take up the attitude of the church to depicting Jesus and investigate the roots of the image of Jesus in the films. The

[1] Good and more detailed surveys of the history of Jesus films, including separate reviews and analyses of the most important films, are found in the books by Tatum, Baugh and Zwick, but none of these publications discusses Dennis Potter's 1969 Son of Man.

evidence will reveal that, although early Christianity had very divergent views on this issue and contained a variety of images of Jesus, a certain uniformity developed over time. At the end of this section we will discuss the issue of anti-Semitism with respect to its effects on the depiction of Jesus in general, the attitude of Christians towards the Jews and the presentation of certain Biblical scenes in the Jesus films. Finally, in the fourth section, we will sum up our findings and draw some conclusions.

1. A Short History

1.1. *The First Films*

Within one year, La Passion du Christ was followed by four other movies about Jesus (Zwick: 57). Two, both of which were also based on passion plays, attracted a great deal of attention. The first one, The Horitz Passion Play, which premiered in Philadelphia on 22 November 1897, was the filming of a passion play in the town of Horitz in Bohemia.[2] It was, however, an American film production. It consisted of a maximum of 45 scenes, which included footage of the town, the preparation of the scenes by the actors in addition to scenes derived from the Tanakh (Old Testament)[3] and the New Testament. The story about Jesus covers his life from the visit of the Magi to his resurrection (Tatum: 3; Baugh: 8).

The title of the second film was The Passion Play of Oberammergau, thereby suggesting that it was an authentic version of the passion play produced every ten years in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau. It premiered on 31 January 1898, but the *New York Herald* revealed the next day already that it had been shot on the roof terrace of the Grand Central Palace Hotel in Manhattan. In spite of this announcement, the movie was a major box-office success. The film consisted of 23 scenes, lasted 19 minutes and depicted the life of Jesus from the visit by the shepherds of Bethlehem to his ascension (Tatum: 3–4; Baugh: 8–9). Both films 'had no titles on the screen, thereby requiring a live narrator to provide commentary for the viewing audience. The mov-

[2] At present the town of Horice in the Czech Republic.

[3] The present author prefers to use the term Tanakh, the name the Jews themselves use for their Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament.

ing images and narration were complemented by live music to lend solemnity to the occasion' (Tatum: 3). What added to the success of THE PASSION PLAY OF OBERAMMERGAU was that a Protestant preacher bought a copy and showed it all over the country in revival meetings (Baugh: 9; Holloway: 48). For the first time in history a Jesus film was used in evangelism.

1.2. *The Silent Films*

The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ

Many other Jesus films were released during the era of silent film, three of which acquired a certain importance. The first was LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE JESUS-CHRIST (THE LIFE AND PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST) produced by Ferdinand Zecca (1864–1947) and Lucien Nonguet (1868–1920 or later) for the French film company Pathé Frères. The first version released in 1902 consisted of 18 black-and-white scenes that were based on etchings by the French artist Gustave Doré (1832–1883). Already in 1903 Pathé Frères succeeded in adding colour to the movie and ten new coloured scenes were added to the film. In 1905 Lucien Nonguet added another three. The movie now had 31 scenes.[4] This film was re-released twice: in 1914 as THE LIFE OF OUR SAVIOUR and again in 1921 as BEHOLD THE MAN! In the last edition the scenes were used to counterpoint a modern, newly shot narrative in black and white (Baugh: 9; Kinnard and Davis: 29–30). The film, however, is of poor quality, 'with an unimaginative set design and curiously gauche performers' and 'a few crude attempts at special effects' (Kinnard and Davis: 29).

Two things made this film interesting. First, it was the first Jesus film in which the audience could see Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. This scene was already shown separately in 1899 in CHRIST WALKING THE WATERS, a movie lasting only 35 seconds shot by the French filmmaker Georges Méliès (1861–1938), who specialized in 'showing fantastical events that could not happen in "real life"' (Pearson: 18). Second, it is very probable that this film was seen by the Indian Dada Saheb Phalke in Mumbai (Bombay)[5] in 1910 (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 9 and 11;

[4] The present author counted 35 scenes, however. Some scenes were probably divided into two.

[5] The official name of Bombay is now Mumbai, which will be used in the present study.

Website of *Upperstall*), thus giving the initial impetus to the rise of the religious film in India.

From the Manger to the Cross

The second important movie in the silent film era is FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS made by Sidney Olcott (1873–1949) for the Kalem Company, at that time one of the leading American production companies. This 75-minute movie was released on 14 October 1912. It was the first Jesus film that was shot partly in the Middle East, which is clearly visible in the scenes of the flight to Egypt where the spectator sees the pyramids in the background. Various scenes were obviously inspired by the pictures in the illustrated Bible done by Gustave Doré.[6]

The film shows the life story of Jesus, who is played by Robert Henderson-Bland (d. 1941), from his birth to his death in ten parts, each of them with its own title. John 3:16 is quoted after Jesus' death, thus emphasizing the redemptive nature of his death. Following each of the headings come subheadings consisting primarily of quotations from the gospels cited by chapter and verse, taken from all four gospels. The translation used for these texts is the King James Version, thus making the film something of an illustrated edition of this version. The American Protestant theologian and Jesus film expert W. Barnes Tatum points out that the film includes

> imaginative touches that stand up well in the entire history of Jesus cinema. Jesus stands besides his mother as she reads to him outside his father's carpentry shop in Nazareth. He rides a donkey en route to Jerusalem while his mother and his father walk. Later, back in Nazareth, he emerges from the carpentry shop into the sunlight carrying a wooden beam; and the wooden beam casts a cross-like shadow on the ground. (Tatum: 25)

Interestingly, there are no depictions of angels in the movie. This does not mean that the filmmaker tried to present a secularized portrait of Jesus' life, since the verses quoted from the gospels show that Olcott's

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[6] Various authors also mention the Tissot Bible (Babington and Evans: 118–119; Tatum: 23–24, 42; Walsh 2003: 2), but with regard to this picture the text on the DVD box, the other literature and my own comparison of these films with Doré's illustrations (Doré) point clearly to Doré. Babington and Evans speak in a more general sense about the Tissot Bible, asserting that both the illustrated Bibles of Tissot and Doré had their impact on the representations in the Jesus films.

view of Jesus was still very traditional. One of the ten parts is even completely devoted to Jesus' miracles, but in this section it is especially the gratitude of the people who were healed and the astonishment of the spectators that make clear that something miraculous had happened. The emphasis is not on the sensational aspect of Jesus' acts. In the sequence about the adulterous woman (John 8:1–11) Jesus only has to raise his hand to ward off the men who wish to stone her. His authority is undisputed, almost divine. Nonetheless, the omission of many miraculous events slightly alters the movie's nature in comparison with earlier Jesus films, which gladly showed these events in Jesus' life, including the appearance of angels to show the audiences the special possibilities cinema offered. The open-air shooting of this film make it a biography rather than a theatre play, although, compared to Cecil B. DeMille's KING OF KINGS, it does still consist of a series of separate scenes. FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS marked the transition of the Jesus film from a cinema version of a passion play to a real feature film. In fact, the transition had its roots already in THE HORITZ PASSION PLAY, because this movie started with the visit of the Magi, a scene belonging to the biblical narrative about Jesus' birth. Thus, unlike earlier Jesus movies, FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS moved from being the filming of a theatre play to being a biography.

The film is clearly a step forward and was also a great success. It ran non-stop in London cinemas for 8 months and was released again in 1938 with an added soundtrack and close-ups (Holloway: 51).

The King of Kings

The next important film of the silent period, THE KING OF KINGS, was a real feature film. This movie, which premiered on 19 April 1927, lasted 112 minutes and had the narrative structure typical of the feature film. The director, Cecil B. DeMille, did not start, however, with Jesus' birth but with a scene in which Mary Magdalene—in this movie a beautiful courtesan—becomes angry at Judas because he is no longer interested in her but in a strange man. It is not until the next scene that Jesus is seen and then through the eyes of a girl he healed. A warm, friendly and fatherly man looks into the eyes of the spectator. DeMille selected Henry Byron Warner (1875–1958), who was 51 years old when the movie premiered, to play Jesus. This man travels throughout the country, healing and preaching, comes into conflict with the priests—in particular the high priest Caiaphas—and dies on the cross. But he is

then resurrected; the scene shows Jesus ascending above the world, a modern world, while a choir sings 'Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me'.[7] The words of Matthew 28:20 then appear: 'Lo, I am with you always.' In this way the motion picture tells the story of Jesus Christ in 27 scenes intersected by texts explaining the images. Many of these texts are verses derived from the Psalms, the gospels and 1 Peter and the translation used is again the King James Version (Tatum: 51). The film is in black and white; only the sunrise of the morning on which Jesus rises from the dead is in colour.

The King of Kings became the most successful Jesus film of the era of silent movies. 'Missionaries have carried prints of it up the Ganges and Congo rivers' (Campbell and Pitts: 107). DeMille himself calculated that his feature had been seen by 800 million viewers all over the world (Tatum: 47).[8]

1.3. *Later Films*

After the Start of the Sound Era

Although other Jesus films were made later, it was not until 1961 that the next important Jesus film was released. The most prominent film in the intervening period was Ecce Homo (Behold the Man), produced in France in 1935 by Julien Duvivier. It was shown in the United States two years later as Golgotha. The movie, which lasted 105 minutes, presented Jesus' life from Palm Sunday to his ascension. What makes it important is chiefly the fact that it was the first sound movie about Jesus. The American film journal *Variety* hailed it as 'an accomplishment that should bring world-wide prestige to the French film industry' (Kinnard and Davis: 56). It focused on the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate, but Jesus, played by Robert Le Vigan, seemed to be overpowered by the more dominating Jean Gabin who played Pilate. Because of Le Vigan's soft voice and the space devoted to Jesus' suffering, the German Catholic film agency remarked critically that it did not do enough justice to the fact that Jesus was the Son of God (Baugh: 13; Zwick: 61). In the United States DeMille's The King of Kings remained the more popular of the two (Tatum: 59).

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[7] The text is from the song by Augustus M. Toplady (1740–1778), the melody by Thomas Hastings (1784–1872).

[8] Campbell and Pitts have 600 million (Campbell and Pitts: 107).

Another characteristic feature of this period was that Jesus appeared in a series of movies about other individuals. An example is QUO VADIS (Sam Zimbalist, 1951), a film about Peter during the time of the Roman emperor Nero. When Peter tells about his master, Jesus appears in a flashback on the screen to illustrate Peter's words (Baugh: 14–17; Tatum: 63–64).

It was stated above that the reputation of DeMille's movie was such that many filmmakers hesitated to produce a new Jesus feature. But this was not the only reason why the film producers were cautious. In 1930 the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) adopted a Production Code stipulating that 'Reference to Deity, God, Lord, Jesus, Christ shall not be irreverent' and 'no film or episode shall throw ridicule on any religious faith.' In 1934 the Catholic bishops of the United States created the Legion of Decency to make sure that the film industry did enforce the Production Code and give moral guidance about films to their Catholic constituency (Tatum: 61–62).

By the end of the 1950s times had changed. The churches seemed to adopt a more open attitude towards the modernising world in which it found itself. In 1958 Pope Pius XII (1876–1958) saw a Spanish film about Jesus entitled LOS MISTERIOS DEL ROSARIO (The Secrets of the Rosary). Produced in 1957, it consisted of 15 episodes lasting 25 minutes, each episode representing one bead of the rosary.[9] Afterwards the pope blessed everyone who would see this film (Zwick: 63 and 99). In October of that same year the open-minded Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) took office and one year later DeMille passed away.

King of Kings

Two years later a new important Jesus feature was released, KING OF KINGS, produced by Samuel Bronston (1908–1994) and directed by Nicholas Ray (1911–1979). The film is 150 minutes in length and is a full-fledged feature that relates the life of Jesus from his birth to his ascension. It is completely different from DeMille's movie. KING OF KINGS focuses on the political situation of the Jewish country and starts with the desecration of the Jerusalem temple by the Roman soldiers under Pompey in 63 BC. It then depicts the cruel oppression of the Romans as well as the violent resistance of the Zealots. It is in this context that Jesus, played by Jeffrey Hunter (1926–1969), emerges

[9] It was released in the United States in 1965 as THE REDEEMER (Zwick: 85).

as the Prince of Peace in opposition to the Zealots led by Barabbas. Although Jesus is an inspiring and merciful character, he apparently fails to understand his situation. He is ultimately sentenced to death and crucified, but the audience does not really understand why. Jesus himself, with his blue eyes and his wavy blond hair, has a very American appearance.

Ray's motion picture contains actions that generate full emotions while the whole story of Jesus is portrayed in terms of the 'good guys' (or the good hero) *versus* the 'bad guys'. This clearly reflects the Hollywood style of filming that had developed since the release of DeMille's biopic (Bordwell and Thompson: 76; De Bleeckere 2004: 362–363; Frederiksen).

Time and again there are riders and horses running back and forth across the screen. One of the Roman officers acts as Jesus' lawyer when he is brought to Pilate. It is no surprise, therefore, that the viewer has the impression that he is watching an 'antique western' (Hasenberg 1997: 46) or an American courtroom drama.

Other factors, such as Jesus' visit to John the Baptist in jail and the friendship and repeated mutual consultations between Pilate and Herod Antipas as well as the very youthful and passive appearance of Jesus, especially in comparison to his most well-known predecessor, Henry B. Warner, added to the film's unbelievability (Babington and Evans: 102; Tatum: 85–86).

Il Vangelo secondo Matteo

On 4 September 1964, the next important Jesus movie premiered at the Biennale, the Venice film festival in Italy. It was called Il Vangelo secondo Matteo (The Gospel according to St Matthew), produced by the famous Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975). This film differed completely from the King of Kings and many of its predecessors. Pasolini considered the text of Matthew's gospel to be an excellent filmscript and therefore tried to follow it meticulously, although he certainly omitted some parts. Adele Reinhartz points out that Pasolini also sometimes reframed the context of Matthew's words by inserting some significant scenes unaccompanied by dialogue (Reinhartz: 26, 92–93). The film is in black and white and most of it was shot in deserts, fortresses and small towns in various regions in southern Italy, including Sicily (for more detail see Baugh: 98), whereas the great majority of the actors came from what Pasolini called the subproletariat

of these regions, since they were people and landscapes analogous to those of the world of the gospel. Lloyd Baugh writes:

> These authentic, timeless settings and the equally authentic and timeless peasant faces of most of Pasolini's actors, marked by centuries of abandonment, poverty and suffering, give an unmistakable political valence to the *Gospel*.... Consequently, the Jesus of Pasolini's film, in his strong critique, already present in Matthew's Gospel, of the religious and social institutions of his time, is by analogy making a parallel critique of contemporary Italian institutions. (Baugh: 98)

These Italian institutions included the Roman Catholic Church. The decision to have ordinary people in the film also gave it the appearance of being a passion play, because passion plays are usually performed by common people. But certain actors had other origins. Pasolini's own mother played the older Mary, whereas the director choose a Basque student, Enrique Irazoqui (b. 1945), to play Jesus. This was an act of courage, since Irazoqui's face did not reflect the traditional appearance of Jesus' face. The Basque's face was rugged and somewhat surly, but this accentuated Jesus' revolutionary attitude in THE GOSPEL.

The Greatest Story Ever Told

Before THE GOSPEL premiered in the United States on 17 February 1966 (Tatum: 114), another great Jesus film was released, THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD, produced by George Stevens (1904–1975). Stevens claimed that he did not derive the material for his film directly from the gospels but from a novel of the same title by Fulton Ousler. Tatum, however, asserts that the producer only used the book's title (Tatum: 89). THE GREATEST STORY premiered on 15 February 1965. Although the motion picture certainly has its merits, it did not become the success that it was expected to be.

> The film opens in a church with the camera angled upward into the dome painted with frescoes depicting scenes of the life of Jesus. A voice-over reads the words of John 1:1. When the camera moves downward it passes a medallion showing the Greek capital letters spelling *Ego eimi*. Then another voice says: 'I am He.' The voice-over continues to read John 1:2–5. In the meantime the camera passes a painting depicting Jesus in a white robe lifting his arms in a gesture of benediction, after which it shows a star-spangled sky. One star surpasses the others in its radiance, changing into a small flame that casts its light on a camel. The film then moves to the story of Jesus' birth. At the end of the movie the camera returns to the church, shows the dome again, the medallion with the same Greek

> words *Ego eimi* and ultimately rests on the painting of Jesus who is still giving his blessing. His last words, from Matthew 28:20, resound in our ears: 'I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

Thus, George Stevens made it clear that Jesus represented the God of Israel who is called 'I am He'—in Greek *Ego eimi*—in the book of Exodus and that He will always be with us as a blessing Jesus. The opening also makes clear that the director obviously wished to take the gospel of John as his starting point, but he also derived much material from the gospel of Matthew and some details from Luke. The Greatest Story is certainly more faithful to the text of the gospels than the King of Kings was. The gospel of John is more mystical than the other gospels, which was reinforced by the actor playing Jesus, the Swede Max von Sydow (b. 1929). Still unknown in the United States at the time—although he had already had important roles in a number of films produced by the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman—he gave a convincing performance. But he was the only less well-known actor in an important role. Almost all the other great roles were played by famous actors such as Charlton Heston, Pat Boone, John Wayne and Sydney Poitier, well known from more secular movies. The effect was that the audience saw Charlton Heston, for example, instead of John the Baptist, or Sydney Poitier instead of Simon of Cyrene, so that the film seemed to portray Jesus surrounded by the great Hollywood stars. The special position of Jesus was, moreover, reinforced by the fact he used the language of the King James Version, whereas other characters spoke ordinary, even colloquial English. The landscape shots also had an alienating effect, since the film was made in the region of the Grand Canyon. It resulted in beautiful landscape views, but everyone knew that this was not Palestine but Arizona or, even worse, the country of the Western. The scene of the last supper copied Leonardo da Vinci's famous fresco meticulously, whereas the music consisted of many well-known compositions by famous composers like Händel.

Son of Man

On 16 April 1969, just after Easter, Channel 4 of the British Broadcasting Company (bbc) broadcast an 85-minute black-and-white low-budget Jesus film produced by Dennis Potter that caused great controversy and resistance in Great Britain and, after being shown in the Netherlands in 1970, in this country as well. But there were also those who loved the film. Its title was Son of Man. The bbc broadcast the film two more times, in 1987 and 2005 (Website of *The Television Plays and Serials*

of Dennis Potter). On 22 October 1969 a theatre version opened in Leicester, UK. Although the theatre version is in many respects similar to the film version, there are also some important differences.[10]

The picture is a rather dark black-and-white film, thus recalling the atmosphere of the *film noir*. The filming is poor in comparison with its predecessors, such as Ray's KING OF KINGS, Stevens' GREATEST STORY and Pasolini's GOSPEL, but the actors, including Colin Blakely (1930–1987) who plays Jesus, give convincing renditions, which enhances the quality of the picture. The actors are obviously stage actors. So their gestures are somewhat dramatic, since, unlike film actors, stage actors act with their whole body. Since SON OF MAN is a television film, most shots are close-ups. There are also many medium shots but not very many long shots.

It has already been stated that this feature is one of the key films in the history of Jesus movies. Since this feature did not receive much attention it is necessary to present a more elaborate survey.

> The biopic starts with scenes[11] of Middle Eastern villages and the voice of John the Baptist proclaiming that the Messiah is coming. John himself is shown later as well. Then the camera focuses on Jesus who is in the desert, lying down on the ground rolling and wrestling with himself, asking, 'Is it me? Is it me?' He then concludes: 'It is me.… The Kingdom of Heaven is upon me!' He refuses to turn the stone in his hand into bread, but he does get up in order to return to civilization. Then Pilate and Caiaphas are seen discussing the issue of the Roman soldiers marching through Jerusalem with uncovered standards. Caiaphas argues that these standards are idols and need to be covered in the holy city. Pilate gives in on the condition that Caiaphas prevent uprisings among the people.
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> In the next sequence Jesus calls Peter and Andrew. Although they first take him for a lunatic, they are persuaded to leave their business and follow him, for Jesus claims that the heavenly kingdom is upon him. The

[10] Two scenes in the theatre version are missing from the film. They are the first scene, in which Jesus seems to receive a call from God (Act I, scene 1, see Potter: 1), and the eighth scene, in which four disciples see that Jesus is praying but at the same time seems to be sick (Act I, scene 8, see Potter: 13–15). The film includes one scene not present in the theatre play, i.e. the scene in which Jesus discusses the tragic fate of John the Baptist and calms an insane woman (between scene 1 and 2 of Act II, see Potter: 26). For that reason, the announcement that SON OF MAN is a film without Mary Magdalene (Website of *Screenonline*) is untrue. The film version also lacks the last words ('It is accomplished') (Potter: 51). So the feature ends with the more desperate 'My God! My God! Why have You forsaken me?'

[11] The present author saw the SON OF MAN in the Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, on 3 September 2007.

film suddenly shows a man dying on the cross, surrounded by a crowd crying: 'Deliver us, deliver us.' In the next scene Caiaphas stands before his fellow priests claiming that the Romans are giving in to him, since the Roman standards are covered in the holy city. The priests remind him of the unrest in the country and the many men claiming to be the Messiah. Caiaphas consoles them by saying that two of them had been crucified the day before. 'God did not step down to pluck them off the cross,' he says. To his own dismay, Pilate discovers that the Samaritans do expect the Messiah as well. In the meantime Jesus gives his Sermon on the Mount in the hills of Galilee. He proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven and challenges his listeners to love one another and, if someone hits them on the right cheek, to turn the left cheek to that person as well. His speech ends in a powerful appeal to love one's enemies.

Pilate, however, is watching two men fighting. He is enjoying it, but his wife finds his pleasure abhorrent and says that she prefers songs, the songs of Zion. In the subsequent dialogue she warns him that the people in the villages believe in a new Messiah who is telling them to love their enemies. The following sequence presents Jesus discussing the tragic fate of John the Baptist with the people surrounding him. Then a possessed woman comes to him. Jesus embraces her lovingly, calms her down and delivers her from her insanity. In the next scene Caiaphas instructs Judas and some friends to go to Jesus and find out what he thinks of the priests and the temple. Then Jesus appears, teaching his followers; the atmosphere is cheery and full of humour. Suddenly Judas approaches and asks what he has to do to prepare himself for the Kingdom of Heaven. After he admits that he honours the Ten Commandments, Jesus asks him to give his money to the poor. After some hesitation Judas becomes one of Jesus' disciples. Shortly afterward they pass by some crosses and Jesus stops at one of them and points out the beauty of the wood of the cross to his disciples. He says that this cross has its origin in a tiny seed, which God put in the ground. Through the sun's light and the rain it grew for years, finally becoming a large tree. Then the tree was cut down. 'God wants men to build. To have tables to eat off of. Chairs to sit on.… But look what we do. Look! A cross. To kill a man.' Jesus laughs. When Andrew asks what is so funny about that, Jesus says: 'Man! That's what is funny about it! Silly, stupid, murdering man! We take the good things God gave us in order to hurt each other! Why!' Then Jesus points out that people kill for what they call their glory, but perhaps only a fool, an idiot, can see what is wrong with the world. He points to the cross and asks his disciples to keep it in mind and then states that the Father will not leave him alone. 'He burns inside me.… I am His. I am the Chosen One, I am the way, I am the Messiah.' Then Jesus sends his disciples to Jerusalem.

Pilate is being anointed by Ruth, an attractive Jewish slave, but suddenly becomes angry at her when she pours too much oil over his body. He slaps her and then she asks him to do it again. Full of astonishment, he asks her why. She tells him that the Messiah is in the city: 'He is among

us, and I am not afraid.' In the next sequence Jesus cleanses the temple, after which the priests ask him what authority he has to do this, pressing him to show them a sign from heaven. But when Jesus proposes having a thunderbolt descend on them they draw back. In the meantime, one of the military officers tells Pilate that they had succeeded in capturing Jesus Barabbas, but Pilate confronts him, saying that Jesus of Nazareth is more dangerous: he has ideas. 'An idea is stronger than an army, sharper than a lance, more enduring than an empire.' Pilate decides to let Caiaphas deal with Jesus and Caiaphas asks Judas to help him arrest Jesus. Judas refuses, but Caiaphas is able to convince him by saying that Jesus can prove that he is the Messiah after he is arrested. Judas gives in.

While praying in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus again asks: 'Is it me? Is it me?' Then he shouts: 'They will nail me up!' and says, 'It is written so. If I am He. Oh God! Oh God! You are burning inside me! Burning! So why am I fearful?' Jesus stands up to find Peter sleeping. Then Judas arrives and kisses Jesus, explaining to Jesus that he has to come. 'It is the only way,' Judas says. The next sequence shows Jesus before Caiaphas, where Jesus remains silent, even though Judas begs him to answer the high priest's questions. Caiaphas stands before Jesus and asks him if he is the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One, but Jesus is reticent. In the end Jesus only bows his head. Caiaphas uses this movement to shout to the others that Jesus has confessed and committed blasphemy. Then Jesus is brought to Pilate. At first Jesus is silent again but later speaks when Pilate asks: 'Do you love your enemies?… Do you love me?' When Jesus says yes, Pilate slaps him but regrets his action almost immediately and apologizes. 'Don't be afraid,' Jesus answers. This really frightens Pilate. 'What!' he says. 'There is no need to be frightened,' Jesus replies. Then Pilate commands that Jesus be taken away and sentences him to death.

While Jesus is carrying his cross to Golgotha, flashbacks of Jesus' agonizing moments in the desert are seen, showing him asking: 'Is it me? Is it me?' In the next sequence he is crucified. He cries out loudly when a soldier hammers a nail through his hand and cries out again when the cross is raised. After hanging for some time, he shouts: 'Oh God! Oh God! Why have you forsaken me!' The camera pulls back and slightly later the credits appear on the screen.

Dennis Potter has created his own interpretation of the story of Jesus out of a range of elements derived from the gospels, which he cleverly combines into one complete story. He introduced three events not mentioned in the gospels: Pilate's promise to cover the Roman standards in the holy city, Jesus' sermon about the cross, and the scene of Pilate with the Jewish servant. All other scenes can be found in the gospels, but often with a different content, since Potter gave these events a new application. The best examples of how he worked are the dialogues between Jesus and Caiaphas and between Jesus and Pilate. Angels and

miracles are completely absent and the picture ends before the resurrection. Thus there is nothing supernatural in this picture.

The central message of Jesus here is his call to love one's enemies, and it is this message that also becomes the reason why Pilate decides to sentence Jesus to be crucified. Jesus' crucifixion is already prepared by two sequences in which the cross is central, the first time when someone is crucified, and the second time in a sermon by Jesus about the cross. This sermon is composed by Potter himself, even though anyone who is acquainted with the gospels will admit that it could indeed have been said by Jesus. Jesus' call to love even one's enemies leads him to the cross. Jesus realizes this in the garden of Gethsemane, but he has been wrestling with the agonizing question whether he is really the Chosen One since the beginning of the film. His answer is revealing: 'You are burning in me'—a statement that recalls Jeremiah 20:9.[12] In addition, it discloses that the film also proclaims that, at least in the view of Jesus himself, God was present in him as a burning fire, and it was this conviction that gave him the strength to continue on his way to the cross. Potter stated in an interview that he wanted to 'strip the mysticism away (of the traditional representations of Jesus) in order to find mysticism' (Website of *The Television Plays and Serials of Dennis Potter*).

Whereas the film Son of Man caused much upheaval and opposition, the theatre play caused less (Website of *Screenonline*). My impression is that theatre play is less shocking, since it ends on a more hopeful note. Potter knew that his motion picture would disturb people. In any case, as the first filmmaker producing a Jesus picture that focused on Jesus' subjectivism, Dennis Potter was a pioneer.

Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar

1973 was a special year in the history of Jesus films, since it was the year in which two filmed Jesus musicals were released, Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar, the former directed by David Greene (1921–2003) and the latter by Norman Jewison (b. 1926). Both musicals had already been performed in theatres before, Godspell in New York in 1971 and Jesus Christ Superstar in London since 1969.

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[12] There the prophet says: 'But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.'

The character of the musical genre loosens the strong ties many Jesus movies have with the Bible and with historical reality. More so than other films, musicals present impressions. Nonetheless, these impressions can be very influential, since the image of Jesus that many of the younger generation had in the 1970s and the 1980s was often strongly coloured by the Jesus in JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR. As one of the greatest box-office successes of its time (Baugh: 35), the movie was seen by a great many people in the Western world, while the song 'I don't know how to love Him' struck a sympathetic chord in countless hearts. In 2000 the British producers Nick Morris and Gale Edwards released a new cinematic version of JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR with the same sequences and the same text but set in the modern Western world. In spite of this interesting approach, the film did not become the success the original version had been (Langkau: 111–114, 211).

GODSPELL premiered in March 1973, before the release of the original JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR in August. The movie was shot in New York and begins with John the Baptist walking with a brightly painted handcart across Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan. In the meantime he blows the traditional ram's horn, the Jewish *shofar*, and sings the opening song 'Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord'. People are attracted to him from various quarters and start to follow him. He stops at a fountain, where his seven followers, black and white, male and female, jump into the water and begin to dance. John baptizes them and their clothes change: from now on they are dressed as clowns, for they live in a playful world. Jesus (Victor Garber (b. 1949)), who wears a blue boxer's shirt, is standing at the edge of the fountain. He asks John to baptize him, which is followed by the song 'Save the People'. Remarkably enough, Jesus wears no beard. His hair has 'a Jimi-Hendrix-Afro-look' and he has 'painted clown's eyes' (Baugh: 46). He dons red clown shoes, brightly coloured pants with orange suspenders and a T-shirt emblazoned with an S-emblem, probably referring to the word Superman. Jesus has become a clown as well. During the various dances he often takes the lead, so GODSPELL is the first important Jesus film to show a dancing Jesus. After his baptism Jesus also becomes the leader of the gang, although John the Baptist continues to act as a strong antipode.

What makes GODSPELL special is that it also includes many of Jesus' parables. On the other hand, it omits all the miracles, including Jesus' healings. Halfway through the film John the Baptist turns into Judas. Jesus has made a long journey by sea and returns to the harbour of New York where he is confronted on the dock by a giant monster puppet

representing the Pharisees, although it is controlled by his own friends. All the major issues taking place between the Pharisees and Jesus in the gospels are shown here, culminating in Judas' betrayal of him. After Jesus' crucifixion at a gate to Central Park, his friends carry his dead body through the streets of New York, probably conveying the message that, by taking his body with them, they continue his life in one way or another. The only time the film speaks about the resurrection it views it as a metaphor. In other words, the lives of Jesus' followers will, metaphorically speaking, show Jesus' resurrection.

Godspell is a more cheerful movie than its fellow musical Jesus Christ Superstar. It omits the dark sides of the history of Jesus while giving Jesus and his followers the appearance of being clowns. He appears as a hippy guru surrounded by a group of hippy disciples in a light-footed carefree atmosphere with a taboo on money. In this milieu people learn wise lessons that also critique society and its religious authorities, but Godspell shows little of the fierce struggle and the suffering necessary to achieve the objectives for which Jesus stood.

The other musical, Jesus Christ Superstar, covers Jesus' life from his anointing by Mary Magdalene to his crucifixion. The film does not include miracles. On the contrary, in one of the sequences Jesus seems to be overwhelmed by the illnesses of the sick people seeking to be healed by him. Jesus, played by Ted Neeley (b. 1943), is a white man with long blond hair. He is a seeker who acts only after deep internal struggle. There seems to be something mysterious about him, recalling what theologians call the *Messiasgeheimnis*, the Messianic secret that they discovered in the gospel of Mark.[13] Jesus—but also Judas and some other main characters—wrestle with the question if certain actions are really God's will. People seem to be only puppets in the play of God, but they complain about it to God. Jesus Christ Superstar stresses what the main protagonists perceive, expressing these perceptions in the songs and the music.

Although the movie was shot in Israel, it did not pretend to give a historically accurate representation of the gospels. On the contrary, the film is full of modern elements. The Roman soldiers wear khaki military pants, lavender tank tops and construction helmets. King Herod puts on a Bermuda and amber sunglasses. The high priests climb a modern scaffolding. The merchants in the temple sell postcards, drugs, military

[13] See section 3.2.

weapons and contemporary foreign currency. Thus, the time in which the film takes place is fluid. The environment of the desert and mountainous area, including the ancient ruins as well as the dress of certain people, like Jesus himself, remind us of Jesus' historical period, while other things clearly belong to the modern world, not least the rock music itself. In this respect it follows GODSPELL.

Il Messia

On 18 February 1976 the famous Italian filmmaker Roberto Rosselini (1906–1977) released his last film, IL MESSIA (The Messiah), a film about Jesus which 'never made it to the States' (Baugh: 84). Surprisingly—given that Rosselini was a communist—Pope Paul VI, and Catholic organizations supported his production of this film (Zwick: 101–102, 106). They must have had a great deal of confidence in and respect for his talents. Although it premiered in France, it was a French-Italian co-production, for which the filmmaker received a substantial investment of two million dollars from the Family Theater organization of Father Patrick Peyton (1909–1992) in the United States. The movie was shot in Tunisia, where Rosselini had previously shot his film about THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (Baugh: 84). IL MESSIA is in certain respects a remarkable film, since it tries to represent Jesus as one of the great personalities of world history. Previously, Rosselini had produced films about Socrates (1971), Pascal (1972), Augustine (1972) and Descartes (1974). They were didactic films, three of them TV films that were never screened in cinemas. Their main purpose was education. Intended to provide good and scientifically reliable information, the framework of these films did not offer any room for angels and miracles. In contrast to Rosselini's other movies about prominent people, the title of his Jesus film was not simply the name of the person it dealt with, but IL MESSIA, which, of course, revealed what kind of image of Jesus Rosselini wished to present. The most important quality of Jesus, who is played by Piero Maria Rossi, was that he was the Messiah. Rosselini produced a beautiful film with wonderful shots, happily lacking the pomp and megalomania of THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD.

> The film starts with a short survey of the history of Israel that ends with King Herod, relating how often this people suffered from the oppression of authoritarian kings. The survey begins with a story told in the Tanakh, in 1 Samuel 8, where the judge Samuel already warns the people of Israel about this oppression. They must remain loyal to their God: He is Israel's true king. In later times this idea was taken over by John the

> Baptist and subsequently by Jesus. After the conflict in Nazareth, Jesus starts a communal society on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, in which he tries to realize the idea of the kingship of God in an ideal society. This film also presents many of Jesus' parables, although they are sometimes told by one of Jesus' disciples. After the execution of John the Baptist, the communal society breaks up, since it has become too dangerous to stay together. The film does not end with Jesus' resurrection but with a scene in which only his mother Mary approaches Jesus' tomb, sees that it is opened, goes forward to the entrance and looks into the tomb. Then she spreads her hands up to heaven and smiles. The music of an oboe is heard. Mary looks up at the sky, and then the other followers of Jesus arrive. It is as if Mary has understood Jesus' message that he is now with God. God is king and nobody else. She 'saw and believed'.[14]

Mary is an important person in Rosselini's film, because she is the first to follow Jesus after he is expelled from Nazareth. Since then she is always close by and now she is also the first one to understand him correctly.

The omission of angels and miracles has consequences, because it leaves out one important quality of Jesus' appearance, namely that he was also a healer. So the emphasis shifts to the other aspects of his activity, in particular his intention to create a new society. The people of Israel, however, do believe that Jesus performs miracles. It is even one of the motives the high priests use to persuade Pilate to execute him, for the belief of the people can make Jesus a powerful threat to the Roman regime.

Jesus of Nazareth

A film that received public papal support was Jesus of Nazareth made by Franco Zeffirelli (Tatum: 144; Zwick: 102). It premiered as a short television series on Italian TV in April 1977. The production was a joint venture of the national Italian broadcasting company RAI and the British commercial television network ATV. Its total length was 6 hours and 17 minutes, to be broadcast in two parts on two evenings or in four parts on four evenings. The filming took place in Morocco and Tunisia.

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[14] See John 20:8: 'Finally the other disciple [John], who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.' He believed in Jesus' resurrection, which is unlikely in the case of Mary in Il Messia. Nonetheless, Rosselini succeeds in giving his version of what happened at Jesus' tomb a biblical touch, which discloses his master craftmanship as a filmmaker.

JESUS OF NAZARETH is a beautiful film that relates Jesus' life from the annunciation to Mary to his ascension. In fact, it starts earlier in the synagogue of Nazareth where the rabbi is delivering a sermon based on a verse from Isaiah. In this way the life of Jesus, who is played by Robert Powell (b. 1944), is set completely in the context of the Jewish religion. Joseph then appears on-screen as a carpenter teaching a group of students and Anna is subsequently shown arranging a marriage between this Joseph and her daughter Mary. The rabbi confirms their engagement, and that night Mary is visited by an angel. The Jewish context is reinforced by the scenes in which Joseph is giving Jesus religious instruction. This also makes it clear that Jesus does not know everything!

Because of its greater length the narrative of Jesus' life is covered at a much slower rate than in many other Jesus films. As a consequence the sequences are better elaborated.

In the beginning Jesus' social critique remains in the background, but it comes clearly to the fore later in his speech to the scribes and the Pharisees. One of the strong points of the movie is that it shows that the meeting of the Sanhedrin was not chaotic. The decision to declare Jesus to be a false prophet is taken only after ample deliberation in which the voices of the supporters of Jesus are heard as well. The impression JESUS OF NAZARETH gives of Judas is also balanced. Zerah, one of the new characters introduced by the filmmaker, asks Judas to help the Sanhedrin arrest Jesus, because Jesus will then have the opportunity to prove to the council that he really is the Messiah, the Son of God. Thus, it was Zerah and not Judas who betrayed Jesus, since he deceived Judas (see also: Tatum: 141). Zerah is also decisive in the deliberations in the Sanhedrin. And in Jesus' appearance before Pilate it is Zerah who strongly intervenes against Jesus and causes Pilate to change his mind and to sentence Jesus to crucifixion.

Jesus' suffering is interpreted from the perspective of Isaiah 53: Nicodemus reads this text during his crucifixion. After Jesus exclaims 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!', a scribe explains that these words are a quotation from Psalm 22. The reading by Nicodemus and the explanation by the rabbi positions Jesus' suffering as well as its interpretation clearly within the context of the Tanakh. The last words of the film are those of Matthew 28:20: 'I am with you every day till the end of time.'

Zeffirelli, however, also omitted certain scenes related in the gospels, such as the temptations of Jesus in the desert and much of Jesus' physical suffering during the passion. Some suggest that Zeffirelli wished to

prevent the making of a too divine image of Jesus. Others said that he did not want to show Jesus in all too human and compromising positions. Nonetheless, Baugh is right in concluding that because of these accommodations Jesus lacks many qualities that would arouse opposition among the audience (Baugh: 77). Zeffirelli's Jesus is less radical, less harsh and less alienating than, for example, Pasolini's or Potter's. What is also missing in JESUS OF NAZARETH is the apocalyptic aspect. The Kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus himself and, as stated in Jeremiah 31, it will enter the hearts of everyone through conversion.

JESUS OF NAZARETH is a television film, although a version for cinema was also released. Furthermore, the film was widely marketed and also regularly re-marketed around Christmas and Easter. So it is no surprise that this film became a great box-office success surpassing DeMille's THE KING OF KINGS in size of viewing audience (Tatum: 173–174).

The Jesus Film

On 19 October 1979 another Jesus film premiered in 250 film theatres in the United States. Its title was simply JESUS, but in 2000 it was given a new title, THE JESUS FILM, thereby suggesting that it was the one and only reliable and official film about Jesus. Although it was also screened in commercial cinemas, it was not really a commercial film. Its roots lay in the activities of William R. 'Bill' Bright (1921–2003), the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, who had wanted to use a film about Jesus for evangelism since 1945 already but had never found a film he could use nor was it clear how funds could be secured for the production up until 1978. In the 1970s John Heyman (b. 1933), later the director of JESUS who had produced or funded several films, including one about Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), started the Genesis Project which was intended to film the whole Bible. He had already produced films of the first 10 chapters of Genesis and Luke 1 and 2, when he met Bright while looking for more money. In 1978 they succeeded in getting Warner Brothers interested in producing their film and the film was released in October 1979 (Tatum: 165; Eshleman: 68).[15]

The cast included 5,000 Jews and Arabs and the shooting took place on biblical locations (Eshleman: 68).

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[15] W. Barnes Tatum and I have chosen to refer to this film by its producer John Heyman, but in some other publications John Krish and Peter Sykes, the directors, are mentioned. For more detail about THE JESUS FILM see Tatum: 165–175; Bakker 2004: 323–329.

What makes the film special is that, just as Pasolini's film on Jesus follows only one gospel, the gospel of Matthew, this film follows only the gospel of Luke. Although the motion picture is advertised as a film 'based on the gospel of Luke', 'inspired by the gospel of Luke' or 'according to the gospel of Luke', the movie does not present the complete gospel. It omits certain passages, such as the passage about the annunciation to Zechariah that he will receive a son, the birth of John the Baptist itself, and many healings and parables. Only five healings are actually shown and one resurrection, the one of Jairus' daughter. The others are only related afterwards by one of the protagonists. Of the parables only the story of the Good Samaritan is depicted. Surprisingly, the parable of the Prodigal Son, which perhaps is one of the most important in Luke, is omitted as well. Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 are left out completely.

In general, the film follows the lines of the gospel. But the order is sometimes interrupted by passages belonging to a later part of the gospel. There is also sometimes something added, even though it must be admitted that this occurs only very seldom. An important addition, however, is a meeting between Pilate and the chief priests in which Pilate orders them to prevent Jesus from being proclaimed a king. There are rumours that the people intend to make him king, but we see that at that time the chief priests do not take these stories seriously. Of course, the addition of the scene is deliberate, for it takes the guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus away from the Jewish priests and places it on Pilate's shoulders.

Another feature of this movie that receives more attention than in the gospel is the fact that, in addition to his male disciples, Jesus was also followed by a number of female disciples. The company of women is stressed as well by the fact that the profession of faith by Peter is preceded and followed by a scene in which Mary Magdalene sings a song about her Lord, a scene that is lacking in Luke. So the filmmakers clearly wished to temper the somewhat male accent in Jesus' following and to show that Jesus Christ had come for both men and women.

Although Brian Deacon (b. 1949), the actor who plays Jesus, gives a fine performance, Jesus' emotions remain somewhat flat. During the agony in Gethsemane there is never a moment that one has the impression that one is watching a man struggling with the torture and horrible death he expects. We see Jesus going through a long sequence of scenes. He is kind, he acts in the way Luke describes him acting, but never do we see a man who must have struggled with very intense

feelings. For that reason the movie never becomes more than a Sunday School film. It shows us the story told in the gospel of Luke, and it is clear that it does so with the utmost care and congruence. But it lacks the intensity of various other Jesus films.

It was screened in 1979 in 250 film theatres in the USA but was later re-released within the framework of two evangelism campaigns. The first campaign was launched by some Evangelical movements as an offensive against THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST, the movie Martin Scorcese (b. 1942) brought out in 1988. The Evangelicals succeeded in their attempts to have JESUS shown in cinemas for a second time (Zwick: 66 note 44). The second campaign was started by the Roman Catholic Church and by, again, various Evangelical organizations in the years preceding 2000. In connection with this, they released the motion picture for a third time as THE JESUS FILM. The subtitle was 'The Story behind the Millennium': the intention was to show as many people as possible who the person was whose birth, 2000 years previously, marked the start of the calendar. In 2007 the website called *The Jesus Film Project* claimed that the film had been translated into more than 1,000 languages and that it had more than 6 billion viewings worldwide since 1979 (Website of *The Jesus Film Project*). THE JESUS FILM seems to surpass the number of viewers of the Jesus features of both DeMille and Zeffirelli. In any event, of all the Jesus films, the latter is the one that has been translated into the most languages in the world.

The Last Temptation

It was almost ten years before the next great Jesus film premiered. Already before its release on 12 August 1988, THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST by the producer Martin Scorcese, which had been shot in Morocco, created much commotion. The main reason for the upheaval was that Scorcese did not rely only on the gospels for his film but also on the novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957). Kazantzakis wrote the book in 1951, towards the end of his life, and it reflects his own struggle between the spirit and the flesh, a struggle that in his view was universal. But he related Jesus' spirit and flesh to his divine and human nature. Scorcese, however, made a number of radical alterations.

> The film starts with a scene that recalls the first scene of Jesus in Dennis Potter's SON OF MAN. Jesus (Willem Dafoe (b. 1955)) is lying on the ground in an orchard. A voice-over says: 'The feeling begins. Very tender, very loving. Then the pain starts. Claws slip underneath the skin and tear

their way up; just before they reach my eyes, they dig in. And I remember.' Going back into his memory in the next sequence, he sees that he, a carpenter, is making crosses for the Romans. His friend Judas, a Zealot, comes by and asks why he does that. Somewhat later Jesus participates in the crucifixion of a fellow Jew. Then the viewer sees Jesus lying on the ground again and struggling with himself. In the next sequence he sees Mary Magdalene, a whore but also his friend, and then he goes into the desert where he again meets Judas. Judas has been commissioned to kill Jesus but instead becomes Jesus' disciple. Judas promises Jesus that he will kill him if he deviates from the right path.

The film then shows a series of events also told in the gospels, including the scene with the adulterous woman (Mary Magdalene), a short Sermon on the Mount, the baptism by John the Baptist, the temptation in the desert, the meeting with Lazarus and his two sisters Martha and Mary, the wedding at Cana and the resurrection of Lazarus.

The last part of THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST begins with the cleansing of the temple. This causes great turmoil, in the aftermath of which Lazarus is killed. Very important is the subsequent conversation between Jesus and Judas in which Jesus tells Judas that the prophet Isaiah appeared to him and explained to him that he had to die. Here Jesus quotes Isaiah 53:4–12. Judas does not agree. After Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on an ass, Jesus and Judas have another talk in which Jesus asks Judas to kill him. Judas refuses and says: 'If that's what God wants, let God do it. I won't.' Then Jesus predicts that the temple priests will find him. He will die but return victoriously after three days. Judas agrees to betray Jesus. After this scene the story follows the gospels, although Scorcese omits the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. After the trial before Pilate, Jesus carries the cross alone through a deserted city to Golgotha where he is crucified. It is then that the scene comes that made THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST so controversial. Jesus experiences a last temptation in his imagination. He envisions marrying Mary Magdalene, and after her death Mary, Lazarus' sister. Shortly afterwards he commits adultery with Martha, Lazarus' other sister. Surrounded by a flock of children, he enjoys his life as a father and confronts Paul who is preaching that he has been resurrected. Jesus is on his deathbed while Jerusalem is burning when Judas arrives to admonish him to go back to the cross to finish his task.

Then Jesus returns from his fantasy. 'It is accomplished,' he says and dies. This sequence is followed directly by a burst of flashing coloured lights of blue, green, red and orange, with yellow and white dominating in the end. The vigorous sound of a number of sirens is heard, followed by joyous, jubilant church bells in the background: 'it comes very close to effectively suggesting the Resurrection' (Baugh: 69).

Remarkably, W. Barnes Tatum and the authors of *Savior on the Silver Screen* regard the previous scene in which Jesus dies as the end of the

film (Tatum: 184; Stern *et al.*: 278).[16] In the last sequence, which he qualifies as 'a simple strip of celluloid', the German Catholic theologian Peter Hasenberg (b. 1953) sees 'the final destruction' of the illusion the filmmaker created in his picture (Hasenberg 1997: 48).

The great majority of the critics of the film suggested that THE LAST TEMPTATION was about Jesus' sexual needs; one author wrote that the film reflected 'the sexual fantasies of Martin Scorcese himself instead of Jesus' (Barthy: 314). It was, however, not the desire for sex but the longing for domestic bliss that Jesus' imaginative excursion on the cross represents. What was probably more controversial was that, at the end of this fantasy, Jesus lived in a *ménage à trios*, fathering a flock of children by different mothers. A second controversial point was that it was Judas who ordered Jesus to return to the cross. The third point was that in his film Scorcese stressed the human side of Jesus. Scorcese's Jesus is not the perfect man of Christian orthodoxy encountered in most of the earlier Jesus films. He is easily influenced, vulnerable and alone. Instead of being a calm, self-possessed individual, he is disturbed by obsessive dreams. He becomes a neurotic.[17] In other words, Scorcese exaggerated Jesus' humanity and, because of that, his Jesus again becomes special, a man unlike all others, just as he is in classical Christian theology but in another sense.

Unlike the image of Jesus presented in the biblical gospels, his Jesus' attitude towards women is very traditional. Although the producer gives some of them a place at the Holy Supper, which is not the case in the gospels, their role is limited to their 'embodying sexuality and domesticity' (Baugh: 55; see also Stern *et al.*: 281–282).

It is clear that THE LAST TEMPTATION deviates in many respects from the story recorded in the gospels. Nonetheless, it is also obvious that the audience will recognize much that finds its origin in these biblical sources. Although many miraculous moments are omitted or represented in a more modern way, the film also adds some miracles, such as the spontaneous bleeding of the stigmata in Jesus' hands two times, the moment when Jesus takes his heart from his chest without dying, the wine in the cup at the Last Supper really changing into blood, a serpent speaking with Mary Magdalene's voice or a lion with Judas'

[16] For the authors of *Savior of the Silver Screen* these lights, colours, flashes and bells tolling only 'signal the end' (Stern *et al.*: 283).

[17] For a more elaborate discussion see Baugh: 62–65, 70–71; Stern *et al.*: 291–292.

voice. This gives the movie a surrealistic tinge and creates a context in which the miracles of Jesus come across less strangely. This tinge of surrealism, of course, also makes Jesus' journey of the imagination more probable, although it is only fantasy in the film.

In many scenes the music is Arabic. In the scene of the wedding at Cana the music is even based on an Islamic confession of faith (Stern *et al.*: 284). Lloyd Baugh remarks about the *ménage à trois* in Jesus' imaginative journey during his crucifixion: 'It is interesting that in this last detail, Scorcese, perhaps without realizing it, is picturing a custom common in Muslim culture' (Baugh: 68). Here one might also remember how the wedding girls following Mary Magdalene in Jesus' imaginative journey are dressed: they wear veils similar to the Muslim *niqab*s. These things give the movie an Arab and Muslim flavour, probably to suggest an Eastern atmosphere. Added to the tinge of surrealism, this helps to bring the viewers into an environment in which more is possible than in ordinary life.

Already years before its release, THE LAST TEMPTATION was controversial (Baugh: 51; Tatum: 180). After its release the protests and continued calls for boycotts by its adversaries reduced the number of theatres willing to screen the film. It is possible that these campaigns caused it to turn into a box-office failure. But almost everyone, including many secular film critics, are of the opinion that THE LAST TEMPTATION is not one of Scorcese's masterpieces, in spite of its fine and wonderful shots (Tatum: 188).

Jésus de Montréal

The following great Jesus film, JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL (JESUS OF MONTREAL) was a completely different movie. It was a French film produced by the Canadian filmmaker Denys Arcand (b. 1941) and premiered in Canada on 17 May 1989.

JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL interweaves a passion play within a contemporary narrative taking place in the Canadian city of Montreal. In this way the history of Jesus influences and is influenced by contemporary experience.

> The Roman Catholic Father Raymond Leclerc asks the actor Daniel Coulombe (Lothaire Bluteau (b. 1957)) to write and restage a revitalization of the passion plays around the shrine near the Roman Catholic church on Mont Royal. Coulombe accepts the challenge and gathers a small cast of four actors—two male and two female—to perform the new version. After consultation with a theology professor and some study in the university

library he produces a new version in which he himself will play Jesus. This is an important decision, since in the course of the film Daniel will increasingly become identified with Jesus.

The first performance starts at the first station outside the shrine with an explanation read by Mireille and Constance, the two female actors, that Jesus was the son of Mary and the Roman soldier named Panthera. He was therefore named Jeshua ben Panthera, although in Nazareth he was also known as the son of Mary. A discussion between Caiaphas and Pilate follows. Caiaphas promises Pilate to help him get rid of the Zealots. When he is interrogated by Pilate, Jesus declares that his kingdom is not of this world. After a walk to the second station the explanation is continued. It makes clear that there were many prophets and magi in Jesus' time and people easily believed in a resurrection from the dead. Some prophets show what they can do. These are followed by the scene of Jesus walking on the water and helping Peter not to sink into the sea, the healing of a sick woman, the resurrection of the daughter of Jairus and parts of the Sermon on the Mount. Suddenly, a Haitian woman comes forward from the audience and shouts that Daniel is Jesus himself. She begs him to help her. Daniel is stunned. The woman is pulled back, and the performance continues with another part of the Sermon on the Mount and later selections from Jesus' speeches against the scribes, the Pharisees and the priestly elite. Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah. Two men in black intervene and arrest Jesus. Then the Haitian woman comes forward again and warns Jesus, but she is again pulled back. They then go to the third station, where the performance continues with the flagellation and crucifixion of Jesus. The audience subsequently goes to the fourth station in a dark chamber under the church building. Two women report that Jesus died long ago, perhaps already 5 or 10 years before. A man says that death is final, but suddenly a woman shouts that she has seen him: Jesus lives. A man and a woman explain to her that this cannot be true, but then a figure wrapped in a large cloth gives them a piece of bread. The couple recognizes him and the woman embraces him. The four actors climb the steps leading out of the underground chamber saying: 'Love one another. Seek salvation within yourselves. Peace be with you and your spirit.' Aside from Father Leclerc, the viewers applaud. Amidst the applause Jesus descends the steps and joins the other members of the cast.

After the performance Father Leclerc reproaches Daniel Coulombe for having demythologized Jesus' conception and birth. Now he has to inform his superiors. In the meantime, the other members of the cast celebrate their success on Mont Royal. The city of Montreal is visible in the background.

The new version of the passion play is a great success. Mireille, one of the female actors, is invited for an audition for a beer commercial and Daniel accompanies her to the studio. During the audition Mireille is asked to take off her underwear. Daniel becomes furious. He 'cleanses the temple'

> by damaging the camera in the try-out studio, a 'reaction to all that is perverse about the process of buying and selling and the marketing of goods, not to mention of the human spirit' (Stern *et al.*: 312). Then Daniel leaves, but later the civil authorities begin a lawsuit against him, for they hold him accountable for destruction of property.
>
> In spite of Father Leclerc's warnings, the play is performed for a second time. During the performance the police arrive and arrest Daniel. He pleads guilty, but the court psychologist declares that he more stable than many others and not guilty. A lawyer who defends artists brings Daniel to his office in a high building with a magnificent view of the city. He promises Daniel a great future, but Daniel does not feel at home there.
>
> After intense discussions with Father Leclerc, who is against a new performance, the cast decides to continue and performs the play a third time. Warned by the ecclesiastical authorities, the police intervene. Then an accident occurs: Daniel's head is hit by a beam of the cross and he is badly injured and passes out. An ambulance takes him to St Marc Hospital, but there is no bed available. In the meantime, Daniel recovers and, supported by Mireille and Constance, leaves the hospital and they make their way to an underground station. During their walk Daniel—still half-conscious—proclaims loudly to passersby several of Jesus' threatening apocalyptical sayings that he remembers from his passion play. He thus announces the destruction of all these great buildings, 'the abomination of desolation'. After he collapses in the station, Constance calls for an ambulance and Daniel is now brought to a Jewish hospital. He dies there, but his eyes and his heart are transplanted into a woman in Italy and a man in the US, respectively.
>
> In the last scene a part of the church choir sings the last couplet of *Stabat Mater*: 'Quando corpus morietur…' (While my body here decays, my soul Thy goodness praise, is safe in paradise with Thee. Amen) (Reinhartz: 38).

In the literature on Jesus films a protagonist like Daniel is often called a Christ figure. The role such a figure plays in the course of the film is very similar to the role Jesus played in his time (Holloway: 187). The problem with the Christ figure, however, is that theologians in particular tend to see them in almost every film. Nonetheless, Lloyd Baugh's *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film* is an excellent analysis of a number of Jesus and Christ figures in American and European movies. The present study, however, will focus on Jesus—or the Jesus figure as he is called in these studies—as well as on his portrayal in film.

Denys Arcand incorporated various texts and scenes from the gospels in his movie. In the passion play he 'roams freely among the gospel texts, choosing first from Mark and then Matthew, from Luke and then John' (Stern *et al.*: 310), but many scenes outside the passion play also

recall Bible verses and narratives, such as, for example, the 'cleansing of the temple' in the studio. The offer of a great future by the lawyer recalls Jesus' temptation in the desert. The way Daniel treats the other members of the cast, in particular Mireille, reflects Jesus' behaviour towards his disciples. The growing conflicts with the civil and church authorities and Daniel's death in the end recall an atmosphere and processes similar to those around Jesus. Mireille has low self-esteem and is willing to give others the opportunity to make a good deal of money out of her body's attractiveness. But after the encounter with Daniel she gradually regains her self-respect due to the treatment she receives from Daniel and Constance. The film thus becomes a bundle of metaphors and parables wonderfully clarifying the significance of Jesus in the past and in the present. Adele Reinhartz concludes: 'The implication is that it is the story as such, not its historicity, that has the potential to transform people's lives' (Reinhartz: 39).

Although Arcand demythologizes Jesus' conception and birth, he does deal carefully with Jesus' resurrection. The scenes of the passion play dealing with the resurrection seem to suggest that Jesus is still alive. More interesting is the transplantation of Daniel's heart and eyes, which give new life to people far away. And at the end of the film, the *Stabat Mater*—which is, in fact, a resurrection prayer (Baugh: 129)—again keeps open the possibility that Daniel's life is not really finished. The message of the film is clear: Jesus brought love and death cannot stop it.

The Passion of the Christ

Various Jesus films were released in the 1990s, but none of them became great box-office successes. The most successful was probably Robert Young's Jesus, which was released in the USA in 2000. It is part of a television series called The Bible, which consists of a number of features, each representing a biblical individual. Jesus has been broadcast in many countries since 2000 (Langkau: 46–63). On Ash Wednesday, 25 February 2004, however, a new important Jesus film premiered in 3006 theatres on 4643 screens in the United States: The Passion of the Christ (Tatum: 220). Its producer was Mel Gibson, a distinguished actor and producer. After having gone through a crisis in his life, Gibson decided to make a film about Jesus and directed, produced and financed The Passion himself. He even has a role in one shot, hammering a nail through one of Jesus' hands (Tatum: 209), but when the movie was re-cut in 2005 this scene was removed

(Weldon: 10). The film was shot in Italy, in the town of Matera and the Cinecittà studios in Rome (Tatum: 210). The actor James Caviezel (b. 1968) played the role of Jesus.

THE PASSION depicts the last 24 hours of Jesus' life, starting with Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane until his resurrection. Gibson's movie follows the main events of the gospels, which are in close agreement at least with regard to their sequence, but, as Tatum points out, they relate them from varying perspectives and provide different details. Gibson structures his feature also around the fourteen Stations of the Cross and is furthermore influenced by the five Sorrowful Mysteries, i.e. Jesus' agony in the garden, his scourging at the pillar, his being crowned with thorns, his carrying the cross and his crucifixion. Finally, he is influenced by the Good Friday meditations on the seven Last Words of Jesus, all of which he includes in his depiction (Tatum: 211–212). Thus, THE PASSION has a strong Roman Catholic flavour.

Twelve flashbacks, represented as the memories of various characters, including Jesus, his mother Mary and Mary Magdalene, depict some scenes of Jesus' life before Gethsemane. They include biblical scenes as well as scenes not mentioned in the gospels, the most important being Jesus' exhortation to love your enemies and his pronouncements that he is the Good Shepherd, and the way, the truth and the life. Seven flashbacks are memories in which the Last Supper becomes visible, obviously an attempt by Gibson to have Jesus' passion refer to the Eucharist. The non-biblical flashbacks are Jesus and Mary's memories of Jesus' youth.

Gibson was also strongly influenced by the visions of the German Augustinian nun Anna Katharina Emmerick (1774–1824). Her experiences were published in a book in 1833 called *Das bittere Leiden unseres Herrn Jesus Christus* (The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ) (Tatum: 213–216). For one scene, the turning of the cross with Jesus' still living body nailed on it, Gibson was inspired by another mystic, the Spanish Franciscan nun Maria de Agreda (1602–1665), who had visions similar to those of Emmerick. She wrote about them in her book *La mística ciudad de Dios, historia divina de la Virgen, Madre de Dios* (The Mystic City of God: The History of the Virgin, the Mother of God) (Website of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*; Langkau: 77, 82–83).

What impressed the audience the most was the heavy violence of the film. To give one example, Jesus is scourged for a long time and laid down on his back to have his stomach whipped. It is almost unbelievable that any human being would survive such cruel torture. The violence

recalls what occurs in horror films. A clear example is the raven picking at the heads of the crucified criminals. Many young people who like horror films said that they liked THE PASSION.

Furthermore, the film also depicts various other miraculous scenes. Satan figures in it, in Gethsemane, but he is also present among the Jewish people shouting 'Crucify him' and among the Roman soldiers scourging and beating Jesus, and is shown dancing after Jesus' death. Just prior to that, the perspective of THE PASSION was that of heaven: a big tear falls down—it was as if God himself wept because of the death of his Son (see also De Bleeckere 2004: 361, 367). And, of course, the last scene in which a victorious Jesus leaves the grave as a beautiful naked Adonis also depicts a miracle. The hero has proven that he was able to endure the most terrifying violence of this world; he turned out to be equal to it. Nonetheless, it must not be forgotten that Gibson begins his feature with the following quotation from Isaiah 53:4–5:

> He was wounded for our transgressions,
> he was crushed for our iniquities;
> by his wounds we are healed.

Thus, he starts with an image of Jesus in which he is portrayed as the suffering servant, suffering because of the sins of humankind but at the same time healing all through his suffering. The hero vanquished through persevering even though the evil was unbearable for ordinary people. Therefore, Jesus is not a hero because he was eager to win but because of his willingness to suffer.

Already before its release Mel Gibson was accused of making an anti-Semitic film (Tatum: 210–211; 220–225). Some scholars tried to demonstrate that the film strongly suggests that the Jews are the 'bad guys' (Bartchy: 318–325; Frederiksen). Nonetheless the accusations of anti-Semitism faded into the background after the release of THE PASSION. Many accepted Gibson's defence that he did not have any intention of offending the Jews. Already within a few days after its premiere the film had earned back its production costs. It became the biggest box-office success of all the Jesus films.

2. ANALYSIS

The first Jesus biopics were representations of the passion plays that had been performed in the Christian world already since the Middle Ages

(Mork: 3–6). But over the course of time and through the continuous development of new technological possibilities the cinematic images of Jesus began to vary. This section will compare the diverging approaches of the filmmakers and their consequences for the depiction of Jesus in their features. At the same time, a certain development will be discovered and, finally, it will become clear that, amidst all the diversity, almost all the depictions show a striking similarity.

The Nature and Possibilities of the New Medium

It was already stated above that the first Jesus films were filmed passion plays. The image of Jesus in these motion pictures was very traditional: he is the Son of God who suffers severely but emerges as a great victor from the horror of death. These motion pictures leave no room for doubt. The most important objective of these films was recognition: everybody already knew what he or she would see, but that the story of the gospels could be seen on the silver screen was the greatest sensation. Georges Méliès' most important reason for making his CHRIST WALKING THE WATERS in 1899 was to show that film even made it possible to depict Jesus' miracles (Baugh: 9; Pearson: 18), thereby underscoring the medium's aptitude for giving a traditional, supernatural portrayal of Christ.

In the meantime, the filmmakers ran up against the problem that, as a visual medium, film is different from a text or a book. When reading a text or a book, the reader must use his own imagination to visualize what he is reading, whereas someone who is watching a motion picture does not need to do so. Here it is the filmmaker who visualizes everything. Therefore, filming a book is a process of translation, but, as such, it is a process of translation that is more difficult than translating a book from one language to another. Languages are phenomena in the same class, unlike literary texts and filmic images. The Italian semiotician Massimo Leone notes that semioticians call the translations between two languages intra-semiotic translations and translations from books to films inter-semiotic translations (Leone: 352).

While a writer can sketch a situation with only a few pen strokes, a filmmaker will always show images of which the details are completely filled in. Thus, a filmmaker has to make choices whereas an author can leave these to the reader. Therefore, the translation of a book into a film always needs one extra step. Or, to say it in the words of Leone about Mel Gibson's PASSION:

> A written text, one of the gospels for example, tells us that a cross was on the shoulders of the Christ, but it is not obliged to specify how big the cross was, of what colour, of what sort of wood it was made of. And even if we imagine that one of the Gospels was written with the maniacally meticulous style of Proust, no matter how many details are added to the verbal description, it will always be impossible for it to transmit, through words, exactly the same image that the author had in mind while describing the Passion. There is always a gap between the imagination of a writer and her words, and it is exactly in this gap that the reader can find some space for her imagination, and add to the written text what it does not specify. (Leone: 352)

A film differs from a theatre play in this respect as well. In a theatre play a director can opt for a very sober design for the stage, whereas a filmmaker, surely if he is shooting in the open air, will always have to deal with images that are completely filled in. Nothing is left to the imagination of the viewer, even though there are also directors who try to construe a new film language in which the imagination of the spectator is stimulated as well. But this is done in another way, by, for example, a kind of symbolism. Certain details in the image become symbols for something else, so that the viewer has to use his imagination to understand what the director means (for more detail on this see Monaco: 44–54, 63–65, 152–71).

To overcome this problem, the filmmakers producing Jesus films had recourse to the visual arts. At the end of the 19th century, illustrated Bibles were very popular; in particular, those designed by Gustave Doré were bestsellers (Doré: v). In 1902 Ferdinand Zecca, one of the producers of La Vie et la Passion de Jesus-Christ, made 18 carefully costumed and staged tableaux against painted backdrops clearly influenced by the Doré's pictures. Sidney Olcott also used some of his illustrations later as background for the title pictures of his film, whereas Cecile B. DeMille used them as inspiration for many scenes in The King of Kings. There was even a filmmaker in the 1960s who still followed this procedure: George Stevens copied Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* in his Greatest Story Ever Told.

The Correspondence of the Films with the Bible

Sidney Olcott's From the Manger to the Cross, which was released in 1912, also gave a traditional portrayal of Jesus. But what made this film interesting was that it had been shot on location in the Middle East. Thus, the film brought its viewers closer to Jesus' environment. The audience could get the feeling that now that they had seen this film,

they had also been on the spot. This was important, since at that time the great majority of spectators were unable to visit the Middle East themselves. So Jesus' historical surrounding became more important. Furthermore, Sidney Olcott emphasized the congruence of his portrayal of Jesus with the gospels, because the subheadings intersecting the sequences of his film were all quotations taken from the King James Version of the gospels. In 1912 this was the version still read in the great majority of the Protestant churches whereas the Roman Catholics still read Latin versions at the time. Olcott's opting for the King James Version should not be explained as a choice for a more Protestant view of Jesus, although this tendency to be as faithful as possible to the text of the Scriptures is characteristic for the Protestant variety of Christianity. Olcott quoted from all four gospels, a procedure followed by the great majority of those making movies of Jesus. Olcott seemed to choose the quotations that were best suited to his pictures. In the end, however, not one gospel dominates. Each receives equal attention.

Nonetheless, Olcott also introduced some scenes not found in the Bible, such as scenes about Jesus' youth when he was living in Nazareth. The reason was that Olcott, more so than previous producers of Jesus films, tried to give his film the form of a separate narrative. Up until that point, Jesus films were nothing more than series of images intersected by texts explaining them, whereas the narrative had to be provided by the audience or, as was often the case as well, told by a narrator.

Furthermore, the image a film projects has such a high measure of reality that those in the audience often have the impression that things happen as they see them on the screen. It is reality. When viewing a stage play, the spectators are often still conscious that it is 'only' a play, but when they see the images on the screen many have the impression that they are seeing something 'real'.

Because of their similarity to the traditional passion plays, the first Jesus films probably did not give the spectators the strong feeling that they were looking at something real, But Olcott's film likely did, since this movie was shot in the open air, even in that of Palestine and Egypt. Therefore, one may conclude that this film took the step from the use of the imagination suggested in the traditional passion plays to the 'reality' of film, which was, of course, also a constructed reality, even though it was not received as such.

Although Olcott's film was the first Jesus biopic without angels, it still included a series of miracles. Therefore, his portrayal of Jesus is still very traditional. Nonetheless, the absence of angels may have helped to

give the audience the impression that this film was about reality and not about myth.

Cecil B. DeMille's The King of Kings can be regarded as a more sophisticated and more elaborate version of Olcott's motion picture. The narrative was improved: whereas Olcott's film still consisted of separate scenes, DeMille told a story intersected by Bible texts from the King James Version as well. Although angels are absent in the motion picture, the image of Jesus is still very traditional. Jesus performs miracles and, whereas From the Manger to the Cross ended with the crucifixion, De Mille continues with the resurrection and Jesus' appearances after his resurrection from the dead. DeMille went even further by using an actor to play Jesus who was considerably older than Jesus himself at the time. The actor, Henry B. Warner, plays the role well: he is warm and friendly but also stern when necessary. His older age also gives him fatherly traits, with the result that some stated that the motion picture presented God the Father more than it did the Son. Undoubtedly, this was one of the reasons that The King of Kings was regarded as a 'reverend spectacle' (Baugh: 13; Tatum: 56–59; Stern *et al.*: 47–48).

The correspondence with history and the Bible remained important, as well as the hesitation to show angels, miracles and other supernatural events. In Nicolas Ray's King of Kings faithfulness to the historical circumstances dominates, although the congruity with the Bible remains important as well. Furthermore, Ray preferred to have many miracles told by people in his picture instead of showing them directly on screen. Nonetheless, the feature also depicts a few healings and after his resurrection Jesus meets Mary Magdalene. But angels are completely absent. In George Stevens' Greatest Story the tradition of the church appears to be more important and therefore faithfulness to the gospels as well. In this movie everyone speaks ordinary English, but Jesus still uses verses taken from the King James Version. This does not mean that Stevens did not pay attention to the historical context, but it does show his fear of deviating too much from the traditional text of the gospels. The times had changed, however, since in the 1960s many American churches were using more modern Bible translations. What may be counted to Stevens' advantage are the impressive shots he made of some healings by Jesus.

Pier Paolo Pasolini started a new procedure. He chose to follow only the gospel of Matthew but did not use the King James Version. Not only was this very unlikely in Italy, a country dominated by Catholicism, but it also reflected a more modern attitude towards the Bible than

Stevens'. Remarkably, Pasolini's method was not imitated until 1979 in John Heyman's JESUS or THE JESUS FILM, which used the gospel of Luke. Heyman's choice was a consequence of the more fundamentalist philosophy held by the organizations financing the production of his feature, since in this view faithfulness to the scriptures always has precedence over faithfulness to the historical situation. Since the 1990s The Visual Bible, later Bible Vision International, has released more films based on the text of a gospel, including MATTHEW (Robert Marcarelli, 1993) and THE GOSPEL OF JOHN (Philippe Saville, 2003). These films are more like a modern illustrated Bible than a feature film. In fact, only Pasolini's feature and, to a lesser degree, John Heyman's were true successes, but both of them omitted large parts of the gospels they followed, whereas the other two follow the complete text, and MATTHEW even adds some small scenes to the biblical gospel. The latter two films are probably too long and tedious.

All four films try to offer a plausible representation of the historical situation at the time of Jesus, but they do not do so at the expense of the content of the Bible. Except for MATTHEW, in which the fragments about angels and Jesus' baptism are read rather than enacted, all show angels, miracles, healings and Jesus' resurrection. But this did not hold the producers back from emphasizing certain things. Pasolini's Jesus had strong political characteristics and agitated against the power of the religious authorities. THE JESUS FILM and MATTHEW emphasized the Jewish characteristics of Jesus' environment, thereby stressing that Jesus was a Jew and can be truly understood only if this is taken into consideration. The trend to accentuate Jesus' Jewish background and nature started already in THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD but became truly important in Franco Zeffirelli's JESUS OF NAZARETH. In fact, this reflected the new attitude of the mainline churches towards the Jewish people. The last film that attempted to do justice both to the Bible and history was THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST. This aim had to give way, however, to two other endeavours by the producer, his attachment to the visions of both Anna Katharina Emmerick and Maria de Agreda and his striving to confront the audience with the extreme violence Jesus had to endure.

Film Styles and Narration Modes

The American films of the 1960s, especially Nicholas Ray's KING OF KINGS, clearly reflects the Hollywood style of filming developed in previous decades. This can be illustrated by two elements that had become

part and parcel of the Hollywood style of filming intended to attract the attention of audiences and reinforce the tension of the movies. As already stated above, these elements were first, the emphasis on action evoking strong emotions and the framing of the film narrative into a conflict between the 'good guys' (or the one good hero) and the 'bad guys'. The danger of taking that conflict as the starting point is that it widens the gap between Jesus and the Jews. Both motifs return in Gibson's PASSION.

The release of the SON OF MAN in 1969 meant a new turn in the history of the Jesus films, since the perspective of this feature differed completely from earlier biopics of Jesus. The latter were constructed on the pattern of the classical film with classical narration. In classical narration there is a character-centred causality, unity of time and space and an omnipresent and omniscient narrator (Bordwell: 157–164). All Hollywood films followed this pattern until the 1950s. SON OF MAN was completely different, however, since it concentrated on Jesus' subjectivity, on his own feelings and experiences. It was, in fact, the first art film about Jesus that used what the American film theorist David Bordwell (b. 1947) calls 'art-cinema narration', which is a new type of filmmaking that emerged in the 1960s (Bordwell: 205–213). It took its cue from the modern Western novel or, in Bordwell's formulation, from literary modernism. In this form of literature 'the world's laws may not be knowable and personal psychology may be indeterminate' (Bordwell: 206). Peter Hasenberg gives the following description:

> The new filmmaking was noted for (1) a dominance of the subjective point of view, (2) a critical view of society sometimes even with a strong political motive, and (3) a conscious and critical use of conventional narrative and genre structures. (Hasenberg 1997: 43)

The classical Jesus films also pay attention to Jesus' subjectivity but do so mostly only when he is in the Garden of Gethsemane. In SON OF MAN, however, Jesus' own experiences dominate the picture. This pattern later returned explicitly in JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR and THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST. In all these cases Jesus' doubts and uncertainties dominate, so that viewers are confronted with a doubting Messiah. Unsurprisingly, these caused great unrest, but many were impressed, since to them Jesus had become more human, more like them. Moreover, SON OF MAN was also the first Jesus film in which the filmmaker adapted the film completely to the requirements of modern science, since it does not show any angel or any miracle. God was present only in the fire burning in Jesus himself.

Another new approach was followed in the musical films GODSPELL and JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR. Musicals are different from ordinary films in that, as Lloyd Baugh writes,

> the development of narrative is secondary: the story is mainly a vehicle for the songs. The actions done and the words spoken are in function of the songs and music. Strong character development and precise motivation of characters become very secondary. The most tenuous motivation for singing a song is sufficient. (Baugh: 33)

Thus, the character of the genre loosens the strong tie many Jesus movies have with the Bible and with historical reality. Unlike other films, musicals present impressions. Nonetheless, both of these musical films were to a certain extent also faithful to the data of the Gospel. More than most Jesus films, GODSPELL even included Jesus' parables. In FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS the complete opposite occurred. This film presented only the events surrounding Jesus. The historical context was not important in GODSPELL, since the film was situated in contemporary New York and the people wore modern clown and hippy clothes. In JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR the historical context still played a role, since the picture was shot in Israel and the dress of many of the actors also recalled the historical period. Nonetheless, both reflected a new trend in which the historical background of Jesus as well as his historicity became less important. By using the form of the musical and modern music, their main intention was to give a new contemporary interpretation of Jesus. Whereas their predecessors also intended to offer a historically correct portrayal of Jesus, the aim of these films was only to present Jesus as a model for society. They were dealing with myth and no longer with history.

A special case was IL MESSIA by Roberto Rosselini, which was, in fact, the sole documentary film, even though it presented Jesus creating a communal society on the shores of the Sea of Galilee—something for which there is no historical evidence at all. The writer of this feature removed all miraculous events from his picture, although he did have individuals who told about them and believed they had taken place. Following this method, IL MESSIA gives the impression of being made in agreement with all the requirements for scientific reliability, although it still keeps open the suggestion that there was something special about Jesus. Nonetheless, this Jesus biopic is the most forthright in not representing angels, healings and other miraculous events. It is the final point of a trend that was already visible in FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS, and returned explicitly in KING OF KINGS. The Jesus

films released after Rosselini's film had no problems with depicting miraculous events. Scorcese and Gibson even added some.

Another somewhat special case is JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL, since this movie is not about Jesus himself but about the actor Daniel Coulombe who plays Jesus in a musical he himself wrote. In the course of the film he becomes increasingly identified with Jesus and, for his friends, in particular the female ones, he does indeed become someone like Jesus. This film depicts Jesus and gives us an idea of what it would mean to be Jesus in modern times. The musical within the film also claims to reflect the historical situation of Jesus' life. The claim of historicity is, moreover, used to criticize the image of Jesus presented by the Catholic Church. At the same time, the picture is situated in contemporary, modern life. Thus, this movie is not about myth but about the issue of following Jesus in modern reality, in what will become history in the future.

The conclusion is, therefore, that although there may be much that belongs to the world of myth and fantasy in the biopics of Jesus, the great majority tries to situate (or incarnate) Jesus in the history of our universe.

The Reflection of Contemporary Culture in the Films

The authors of *Savior on the Silver Screen* as well as the American theologian Richard Walsh in his book *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* try to demonstrate that the portrayals of Jesus of American films reflected at least the political and cultural situation of the United States. The traditional representation by Olcott and the fatherly Son of God of DeMille supported the values of the middle class and the established churches. Ray's more human KING OF KINGS tried to take the results of modern scholarship into account. Furthermore, this picture reflected the war the United States and its allies fought against the dictatorships of Hitler and Communist leaders. In Walsh's eyes, George Stevens' GREATEST STORY promoted individualism (Walsh 2003: 4–5), while the *Savior on the Silver Screen* characterizes Jesus in this film as a man of the wilderness, a hero like Robin Hood and Thoreau, over against mainstream culture with its politics and corruption (Stern *et al.*: 158–159). Pasolini's GOSPEL reflected the struggle of the leftists against the religious authorities, whereas GODSPELL and JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR propagated the anti-establishment mentality of the counterculture. Zeffirelli's JESUS OF NAZARETH reflected the beginning of conservatism in the 1970s. Walsh argues that THE LAST TEMPTATION and JÉSUS OF MONTRÉAL

belonged to the iconoclastic current also present in American culture. THE JESUS FILM was an exception, since it remade the Jesus-as-divine aspect in the period after Scorcese's movie (Walsh 2003: 5–7). The writers of *Savior on the Silver Screen* assert that THE LAST TEMPTATION is a challenge to the docetic Christ presented by Hollywood. They see in JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL a reflection of the belief that the ideas of Jesus can be realized only in small communities outside mainstream society (Stern *et al*.: 332–333). For the sake of clarity we should point out that Potter's SON OF MAN and Rosselini's IL MESSIA were not discussed in this book.

Jesus and the Other Characters in the Film

Before we end this section with some preliminary conclusions, we must look at the effect of the fact that most Jesus films are classical films following what Bordwell defined as classical narration. In classical narration 'action springs primarily from individual characters as causal agents' (Bordwell and Thompson: 76). So the focus of this kind of movie is on the interaction between the characters in the picture or on what occurs between Jesus and the other individuals. This perspective gave many other characters the opportunity to play prominent roles as well. It will come as no surprise that these others included Jesus' mother Mary, Herod, Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist, Peter, Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate and in certain pictures also Herod Antipas. The characters around Jesus were very attractive for a lot of filmmakers, since they gave them the opportunity to show some psychological development. This was less possible with Jesus, since for many viewers—and for many already from the outset—it was clearly defined who and what he was. Thus, they would not accept any psychological development in Jesus himself, which was confirmed by the opposition that arose when films nonetheless attempted to do so. It was less risky to do so with someone in Jesus' circle, such as Mary Magdalene or Peter. One of the other persons with whom it was also attempted was Judas in, for example, JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR and THE LAST TEMPTATION. Consequently, Judas' performance is more convincing than Jesus', causing Jesus to fade into background in these features—a development that was, moreover, exacerbated by the more prominent position Judas was given in these pictures. He is the man who talks with Jesus on an equal level and keeps Jesus faithful to his mission. In Scorcese's feature in particular, the danger even exists that Judas is the dominant character (see also Paffenroth; Shilling; Walsh 2006). In any event, Jesus is surrounded in

many films by other persons whose attitudes have an impact on the image of Jesus. In particular, it is said that when Jesus is confronted with a strong Judas he is always weak (Tatum: 126; Baugh: 40 and 71; Stern *et al.*: 174–176 and 269–272).

Some Preliminary Observations

The above analysis discloses that the Bible, the visual arts, the results of historical research and the Jewish religion were the main sources for the portrayal of Jesus. The Bible, as the book containing the most information about Jesus, was of course the most important source. But, in particular, the importance of the Bible in the early Jesus films and in THE JESUS FILM also had its origin in the belief that it is the Word of God. The use of the King James Version reflects the fear of the producers of offending their audience, but THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD was the last film made with this fear. Historical research influenced all the Jesus films but most prominently KING OF KINGS. Visual art was particularly important during the transition of the Jesus film from a filmed passion play into a biography. Gustave Doré's illustrations became the most important models. In the 1970s the approach based on the Jewish religion became dominant, in particular in JESUS OF NAZARETH and THE JESUS FILM. Some filmmakers attempted to take the views of modern scholarship into account, but after the release of IL MESSIA this became less important. Another important development was a more psychological interpretation of Jesus, which was reflected in SON OF MAN and THE LAST TEMPTATION by the turn from classical narration to art-cinema narration.

The musicals are a special case. Here the importance of the historicity of Jesus became less and Jesus became a model. Of course, he was already a model in earlier pictures as well, but in these films that he was a historical person as well still remained a crucial factor.

The medium of film itself also had its impact on the image of Jesus, because in classical narration things happen between persons. Therefore, the relationship of Jesus with particular individuals surrounding him became prominent in certain movies.

A certain trend is visible in the history of Jesus biopics. The first films up until the beginning of the 1960s show the audience the Son of God, a divine 'patriarchal Christ' (Telford: 133). By choosing an older actor DeMille's portrayal emphasized his fatherly qualities. In this period the films were reverential depictions of the Lord. Later, THE JESUS FILM,

MATTHEW and the GOSPEL OF JOHN likewise depicted Jesus as a divine but friendly saviour, though not as fatherly as in THE KING OF KINGS. THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST also returned to a portrayal of Jesus as the Son of God.

The 1960s and the 1970s saw a boom of Jesus biopics, followed by two new pictures at the end of the 1980s. In the 1990s and around 2000 there were also some new Jesus films released (Langkau: 24–35), but none of them became a great success. This lasted until 2004 when a new successful Jesus biopic was screened. The first of all these features, which premiered in the 1960s, KING OF KINGS, displayed an 'adolescent' (Telford: 134) Jesus as a peaceful, non-violent alternative to the violent regime of Herod and the violent resistance led by Barabbas. In Pasolini's IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO Jesus is still pacifist, but he is a clearly stronger character and thus causes more opposition. This 'subversive' (Telford: 134) Jesus was also present in JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL and SON OF MAN, while JESUS OF NAZARETH delineated a friendlier variety of this Jesus. Moreover, SON OF MAN presented a man full of doubt who is constantly asking if he is really the Chosen One, something also seen in JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR and THE LAST TEMPTATION. In the meantime, THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD was released, presenting a mystical Christ that recalled in a modern way the Son of God of the older Jesus biopics. Again, the musical films form a special case. In GODSPELL Jesus is a wise and friendly hippy leader, whereas JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR is the doubting master in a threatening environment, about whom it remains unclear as to whether he is successful in the end.

It is clear that there is a great variety of images of Jesus. The British theologian and film expert Telford comments as follows:

> The Christ we have found, the Jesus depicted in the cinema, has been influenced by the tradition of the evangelist, the imagination of the filmmaker and the social context of the audience.… The screen image of Jesus has varied with the shifts and currents of society itself, in line with its changing social, political and religious perspectives and values. (Telford: 138)

Which portrayals were the most influential during this history? It is well known that DeMille's THE KING OF KINGS was the first great worldwide box-office success (Babington and Evans: 5; Tatum: 50), followed by Zeffirelli's JESUS OF NAZARETH, Heyman's THE JESUS FILM and finally Gibson's THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST (Tatum: 165–166, 209–210; Eshleman: 68; Hutch). The latter three present a traditional image of

Jesus, in which he is primarily the Son of God. Only JESUS OF NAZARETH modifies this portrayal by stressing his Jewish background and that he is God's suffering servant as well. Although THE JESUS FILM and THE PASSION make these modifications as well, both lay more emphasis on Jesus being victorious in the end. Thus, we may conclude that the film image of Jesus that probably had the most impact was a traditional one, presenting the Son of God who overcomes all misery and sin and in this way accentuates in particular the power of the mercy of God.

Although the sixteen most important Jesus films presented a variety of portrayals, fifteen of them shared one remarkable phenomenon: Jesus was a man with dark blond or black, mostly half-length hair and a trimmed beard. The only exception is GODSPELL, which portrays Jesus as a 'gentle hippy with a Jimi-Hendrix-Afro-look' (Baugh: 46) without a beard. The next section will explore the origins of the images of Jesus.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This section will explore the attitude of Christians to depicting Jesus. Two things will become clear. First, a great majority of Christians were strongly opposed to depicting Jesus, with the result that there has been a great variety in attitudes throughout the centuries. Second, there was also great diversity in the images of Jesus, visually as well as ideologically or theologically. This section will explain how Christians dealt with this variety and what the consequences of this were for the representation of Jesus in film. Finally, we will look at anti-Semitism, since this issue had also a great impact on the portrayal of Jesus in film.

3.1. *The Visual Representation of Jesus*

The oldest picture of Jesus is found in the Roman catacombs and dates from the middle of the 3rd century (Mancinelli: 22, 24; MacGregor and Langmuir: 74). Jesus is depicted as a shepherd, a beardless youth with curly hair. According to the Belgian Catholic theologian Peter Schmidt (b. 1945), this is a Christianized version of Hermes Krioforos, the Greek god Hermes bearing a ram. He suggests that Christians started by using images of pagan gods that they subsequently accommodated to their own requirements. They also borrowed images of the sun god Apollo, which could portray Jesus as *sol invictus*, the invincible sun (Schmidt: 117, 125–127). Both gods are beardless, which, according to the Catholic

theologian John Dominic Crossan (b. 1934), indicates that Jesus was a new god (Crossan, website of *From Jesus to Christ*).

The picture found in the catacombs was probably not really the oldest one, since it is obvious that there must have been other images that have not yet been discovered or are lost forever. Already around 210 the church father Tertullian wrote about images made of gold leaf on the bottom of chalices representing the Good Shepherd (*De Pudicitia* 7,1 and 10,12),[18] but perhaps Nicolaus Müller is correct when he states that the Good Shepherd has to be regarded as a symbol comparable to the fish, the lamb and Christ monographs (Website of *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*). This would mean that the picture does not really depict Jesus. However, if these first portrayals were derived from pagan gods, they were also not meant to portray the real historical Jesus.

Many other pictures of Jesus were also found in the catacombs and on sarcophagi dating from the 4th century and later. Many of these show him as a healer or magician, a teacher or a philosopher. In particular, the healing of the woman who was suffering from bleeding (Mark 5:25–34), the healing of a blind man and the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:33–44) seem to have been popular. Later, large images of Jesus were made in mosaics in the apses of the basilicas Christians built during these centuries. What is striking is the great variety in the outward appearance of Jesus in all these images. In most images Jesus is beardless, but, especially during the course of the 4th century, Christians started depicting him with a beard as well (Schmidt: 132). His hair is usually long, which was uncommon at the time, so it made Jesus different from others depicted in the images. But long hair was normal among philosophers. More important, perhaps, is that long, loose hair was also a mark of divinity. The American art historian Thomas F. Mathews asserts that with a full beard Jesus resembled Jupiter/Zeus or Asclepius; without a beard he looked like Apollo or Dionysius (Mathews: 123–128). Other scholars argue that the depiction of a bearded Jesus also bore some similarity to the images of the Roman emperors (Brown; Schmidt: 132). The variety of appearances brings Mathews to the following observation:

[18] Rauschen: 45 and 57; Schmidt: 125. In the notation we will be using, the references in parentheses in the text are to the original source and those in the footnotes to the published editions.

> The alarming truth is that, travelling from Rome to Constantinople in the fifth or sixth century, the Christian pilgrim would have encountered a dizzying diversity of Christ types. From church to church the Lord would undergo the most radical metamorphoses. Now calmly conversing with a circle of disciples…, now climbing rosy clouds into the empyrean… now sitting on rainbows, and waving to the viewer from a great bubble of light above the landscape… Christ's face was alternately old and grave, youthful and vigorous, masculine and feminine. Staring at the glittering apse must have been like experiencing a series of volatile hallucinations. The Early Christian Christ was truly polymorphous. (Mathews: 98)

Mathews believes that Christians were certainly interested in the historical appearance of Jesus (Mathews: 10–11), but unfortunately all relevant information is lacking in the New Testament. Mathews concludes:

> To [the new Christians] he was still utterly mysterious, undefinable, changeable, polymorphous. In the disparate images they left behind they record their struggle to get a grasp on him; the images were their way of thinking out loud on the problem of Christ. Indeed, the images are the thinking process itself. (Mathews: 141)

In the 6th century, when Christianity was dominated by the Byzantine empire, one image gradually became standard: the portrayal of Jesus as *Pantocrator*, which shows Jesus with long dark hair and a trimmed beard. As stated above, the beard made him resemble Jupiter, the father of the gods. Artists thus tried to give Christ a status equal to his Heavenly Father, thus denouncing the ideas of Arian Christians for whom Christ was subordinate to the Father. The potency of this type of portrayal had nothing to do with its portrait accuracy (Mathews: 108–109, 183–184). As stated above, this portrayal of Jesus also recalled the images of the emperor (Brown; Schmidt: 136). Both associations, however, still caused opposition among many Christians because they recalled paganism (Mathews: 184–185; Schmidt: 136, 152). For them Zeus/Jupiter was only an idol, while the emperor was merely a human being and absolutely not God. But, apparently, this opposition was not strong enough to prevent this development.[19]

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[19] Before the publication of Mathews' study in 1993 it was common to assert that this image was copied from the portrayals of the Roman and Byzantine emperors. Mathews' book proved that there is no real evidence for this theory. So the title *Pantocrator* does not mean that Jesus is the true Almighty instead of the emperor but that he, rather than Jupiter/Zeus, is the Almighty God. That is why Mathews called his study *The Clash of Gods*. On the basis of a few examples of depictions of Jesus with imperial paraphernalia, Brown and Schmidt, however, demonstrated that in spite of the correctness of his new

The image of Jesus with half-length dark hair and a trimmed beard was taken over in the Russian icons as well as in Western Christian visual arts. Since the late Middle Ages, however, especially since the 13th century, Jesus' hair becomes blond in many paintings and frescos, although it remained long and the beard was retained. See, for example, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, and the paintings of the Italian artists Fra Angelico (d. 1455) and Michelangelo (1475–1564). Yet there are also many pictures of Jesus having dark hair—for example, the paintings of the Spanish painter El Greco (1541–1614) and the Dutch painter Rembrandt (1606–1669). It remains a fact, however, that Jesus with half-length hair and a beard developed into a sort of icon on almost all pictures up to those of the French graphic artist Gustave Doré, who inspired so many of the producers of the early Jesus films. There were only a few exceptions, such as Raphael's (1483–1520) *Christ Blessing* showing a beardless Jesus after his resurrection (Mathews: 123) and Mark Wallinger's (b. 1959) *Ecce Homo* of 1999. He depicts Jesus with a crown of thorns on a bald and beardless head (MacGregor and Langmuir: 112). But it is precisely this that makes his statue remarkable, because it deviates from what everyone in the West would have expected. Thus his statue reconfirms that Western Christianity already had an icon of Jesus as well. Interestingly, it does not deviate widely from the depiction of Jesus in Eastern Christianity. The most important difference is that in the West Jesus' hair had become blond. Thus, both icons, the Western as well as the Eastern, go back to their Byzantine predecessor.

The American artist James Tissot (1836–1902) was probably the first painter to try sincerely to depict Jesus as a Jew. Tissot did so by placing Jesus in a genuine Jewish context, a synagogue (Schmidt: 51), but his painting is very similar to a photograph and therefore lacks any evocative qualities. The Jewish artist, Marc Chagall (1887–1985) went a step further and pointed to the consequences of Jesus being a Jew. His *White Crucifixion* of 1938 depicts the crucified Jesus visibly wearing a Jewish prayer rug as loincloth. Around him various scenes show the persecutions the Jews had to undergo from various European movements, including those of the Bolsheviks and the Nazis (Pelikan 1985: 20, plus p. 30f.; German edition (Pelikan 1986): 32–33; illustration

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view, Mathews overemphasized it by denying any influence of the imperial culture on the portrayals of Jesus (Brown; Schmidt: 136).

no. 2; Walther and Metzger: 62–65). This was the bitter reality in 1938, because at that time many had forgotten that Jesus was a Jew.[20]

William R. Telford already expressed his astonishment that 'no serious film… has as yet portrayed Jesus as a Jew, and with darker Semitic features, and yet such in reality would have been his appearance' (Telford: 133; see also Reinhartz: 48–49). Telford wrote this in 1997. Unfortunately, Gibson's PASSION, the most important Jesus film after this year turned out to be no exception, since the features of Jim Caviezel's face, the actor playing Jesus, appear to be more Roman than Jewish.

Although it would have been natural to ask a Jewish actor to play the role of Jesus, this did not occur, not even in movies made by producers claiming that they attempted to present historical or biblical reality as faithfully as possible. In this case film art was no different from the other visual arts, thus again revealing a bewildering feature of—primarily—Western Christianity, since there are a great number of paintings and also some films with a blond, blue-eyed Jesus, thus suggesting more of a German or Anglo-Saxon background than a Jewish one. Two of the most explicit films in this respect are the ones produced by DeMille and Ray.[21] It is well known that in the second half of the 1930s there was a major movement in the main Protestant churches of Germany for an *Entjudung*, which meant an eradication of Jewish influence from religious life, including these Protestant churches. For them, Jesus' Jewish roots had become a point of dispute, and if he really had been a Jew, his Jewish background was not essential, because, according to them, his view of God was completely different from the Jewish one (Heschel; Klein: 18–20; Sonne: 38–39). Chagall's *White Crucifixion* is a clear warning that whenever Christians forget the Jesus' Jewish background a wrong kind of nationalist Christianity, including a virulent anti-Semitism, is lurking. We will return to the issue of anti-Semitism in section 3.4.

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[20] Chagall also painted a traditional (Byzantine) image of the crucified Jesus (see his *Exodus* of 1952–1966 (Walther and Metzger: 83)), thus underscoring the importance of his Jewish Jesus of 1938. *Exodus* also portrays a fleeing Mary with her baby Jesus. Since *Exodus* refers to the exodus of the Jews in the 20th century to Palestine, this baby Jesus is a Jewish Jesus. In other words, Chagall continues to point to Jesus' Jewish background in this painting as well.

[21] The present author does not intend to suggest that this proves that DeMille and Ray therefore produced anti-Semitic pictures; to the contrary.

3.2. *The Ideological Background*

Given the great variety of images of Jesus in cinema, it is interesting to note that the New Testament also presents many different images of Jesus Christ. Jesus is viewed as a rabbi, as the Son of Man (a title that the apostle Paul developed into the second Adam), the Messiah, the Son of God (particularly in the gospels of Mark and John), a man inspired by the Holy Spirit (in the gospel of Luke), the representation of God's wisdom, the *logos* (in the gospel of John), and as the Lord. 'Lord' is the translation of the Greek *kurios*, which could have meant 'sir' in the first century CE but also was used as a designation for the eternal God of the Tanakh (Haight: 71, 155–178; Pelikan 1985: 9–20; Theißen and Merz: 317–318; 462–489). Another less common designation is the lamb in the gospel of John (John 1:35) and in Revelation (Rev 5). Furthermore, there are some modifications in these images as well: according to some theologians, Matthew sees him as the second Moses (Wikenhauser and Schmid: 236), and in Mark Jesus wishes to keep his being the Messiah secret, resulting in the so-called *Messiasgeheimnis* (Mark 9:9–10; Theißen and Merz: 107; Wikenhauser and Schmid: 216–219), while the motif of the suffering servant is found in various places in the synoptics, in particular, in the passion narratives (Jeremias: 286–299). A doubting Jesus certainly does not appear in the New Testament, but the gospels mention at least two moments in Jesus' life in which he was seriously in doubt about his mission: the temptation in the desert and his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, both referred to in the synoptics (Matt 4:1–11; 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 4:1–13; 22:39–46). There are even exegetes who claim that the temptation in the desert as related in Matthew and Luke can be found in John as well (see John 6:14–15) (Tigcheler: 93). Therefore, although the gospels do not depict a doubting Jesus, they do portray times of serious desperation for him.

Most of the titles and terms mentioned above arise from below, from the perspective of Jesus' humanity. Two, however, i.e. those identifying him as the Son of God and as the *logos*, start from above, from the perspective of his divinity. The Canadian Roman Catholic theologian Roger Haight SJ points out that in the course of the first five centuries of the history of Christianity *logos* Christology came increasingly to dominate the theological characterization of Jesus, a development that found its peak in the dogmatic representations of Jesus Christ propagated by the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon

in the 4th and 5th centuries. Chalcedon, however, can also be regarded as a partial correction, for it emphasized Jesus' integral humanity, although still within the context of Jesus' divinity and mediation of God and God's salvation (Haight: 244–298). Jesus is—to use the words of Chalcedon—*vere deus, vere homo*, truly God and truly human.

These councils took place in Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, and in two smaller towns in the neighbourhood of this city. It is widely known that the emperors exerted great influence on the proceedings of the meetings. So it is justified to state that the Byzantine context had a great impact on the theological or ideological understanding of Jesus as well.

The screen test Franco Zeffirelli did during the preparations for his film JESUS OF NAZARETH gives a good illustration of the impact of the ideological or theological delineation of Jesus with regard to the choice of the actor who played Jesus. Zeffirelli himself relates that something strange occurred during this screen test.

> Slowly, as the screen test progressed, we all noticed that something remarkable was happening. There was a sense of a miracle, a kind of "message" and "transportation of matter." An image seemed to take shape around this man as if he was a medium. Even more impressive was a kind of aura "not of his own" that was settling on him. (Zeffirelli: 50)

Earlier in his book Zeffirelli had already written about Robert Powell:

> The eyes, which, more than anything else of the human body, are the portals to the spirit, became in Powell two penetrating beams of light. His voice… took on mysterious and distant resonances in him, as though he was transmitting and evoking messages from unknown sources. (Zeffirelli: 41)

Because of his view of Jesus, Zeffirelli attached much value to these phenomena:

> Even with an intensely human touch to Jesus, the man-god, a "presence" easily accessible to us, one cannot obscure the divine radiance that his person emanates at every moment. Everything, every act, every word of Jesus must disclose this double aspect. (Zeffirelli: 40)

The actor who played Jesus had to do justice to the *vere deus, vere homo* of Chalcedon. Section 1 of this chapter made clear that Zeffirelli was not the only one with such a view of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is well known that the directors or—as in the case of JESUS—the organization behind all four biggest box-office successes also had a traditional view of Jesus. So the 'classic' cinematic portrait of Jesus has a strong Byzantine back-

ground in the visual as well as in the ideological or theological sense. In two features, JESUS OF NAZARETH and THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST, there was a second important motif, that of the suffering servant.

Already in 1960 the French Roman Catholic theologian and film expert Amédée Ayfre (d. 1963) made the interesting remark that one of the reasons that filmmakers possibly created very orthodox portrayals of Jesus and other biblical figures was that they used this to attempt to conceal their failure of truly representing the religious abundance found in the religious texts they tried to depict (Ayfre: 91–92). Thus, here is another motive for creating orthodox images of Jesus—namely to minimize the risk of failure.

3.3. *Opposition to the Depiction of Jesus*

When reading section 3.1 the reader could almost forget that it was, in fact, not a matter of course that Christians had images of Jesus. Christianity is a religion rooted in Judaism, and the Torah, the most important part of the Tanakh, forbids the making of images:

> Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God. (Exodus 20:4–5)[22]

Images incurred the risk of being regarded as idols, and the Tanakh abhors the idea of idols and idolatry. The text in Exodus even gives the impression that it is forbidden to depict anything in the world, since all such images can be used as idols. Therefore, many Jews do not wish to have any images at all. The frescoes of the Jewish synagogue in Dura Europos that date from the mid-3rd century (Pelikan 1990: 52; Schmidt: 122) reveal, however, that there were Jews who were more liberal. Apparently they had no problems with 'making images'.

Peter Schmidt rightly points out that

> the refusal to depict God was—and still is—one of the strongest expressions of reverence for his transcendent majesty. The fact that nothing is able to represent God conveys without saying so in so many words that there is nothing in the whole creation that can be an adequate reflection

[22] The King James Version is used here, because this version translates the Hebrew word *pésel* by image. Other versions use the term idol. The first meaning of the Hebrew word *pésel* is indeed idol, but it is obviously also often translated by image.

> of God. God is absolutely without equal. No celestial body, no plant, no animal, no human form can express his essence.… The biblical prohibition against making images also expresses the view that nothing in the universe has a divine dimension. Thus, this very prohibition illustrates the immeasurable difference that, in Jewish eyes, exists between YHWH [the God of the Tanakh] and the other deities or all other things in nature considered to be divine. (Schmidt: 110)[23]

In the view of Justin Martyr (d. around 165), one of the earliest church fathers, the Jewish Bible became the property of Christians, but this did not mean that Christians had to fulfil all the commandments it included. The New Testament already makes clear that non-Jews did not need to be circumcised if they wished to be baptized, as the Torah prescribed. Furthermore, the gospels show that there was also a great deal of dispute concerning the Sabbath regulations. Nonetheless, the Ten Commandments became imperative, since they were considered to be very similar to natural law. As a consequence, the early church fathers forbade making images of Jesus, because Jesus was God. But symbols were permitted. One of the first ones was the XP symbol for Christ. The cross also became important at a very early stage already and slightly later the fish (*ichthus*, whose letters in the original Greek represent an abbreviation of the expression 'Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour'), and, further, the lamb and the vine (MacGregor and Langmuir: 66–71; Pelikan 1990: 52–58).

In section 3.1 it was said that the oldest images of Jesus dated from the 3rd century. They represented him as the Good Shepherd, which probably took them quite a way from symbols such as the fish, the lamb and the vine on the one hand to pictures truly claiming to depict Jesus on the other. In later centuries, however, images of Jesus were no longer problematic for Christians, but the confrontation of the Byzan-

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[23] Translated from Dutch by the present author. The original text is: 'Het niet afbeelden van God was en is een van de sterkste uitdrukkingen van eerbied voor zijn transcendente majesteit. Het feit dat men God met niets kan weergeven, drukt zonder woorden uit dat niets in de gehele schepping een adequate weergave van God kan zijn. God is zonder meer met niets te vergelijken. Geen hemellichaam, geen plant, geen dier, geen menselijke gestalte kan Zijn wezen uitdrukken.… De Bijbel drukt met zijn beeldenverbod evenzeer uit dat niets in de gehele schepping een goddelijke dimensie bezit. Het vervaardigen van beelden associeerde de Bijbelse mens steevast met afgodendienst en heidendom. Juist het beeldenverbod illustreert hoezeer de joden JHWH onderscheidden van alle andere goden, of van alles wat in de natuur als goddelijk gedacht zou kunnen worden' (Schmidt: 110).

tine Empire with the Muslims changed that situation. MacGregor and Langmuir write:

> The political situation in the East was grave. Egypt and Syria had been conquered for Islam in 681. The heartland of the Byzantine empire was threatened by continuous raids of non-Christian nomadic tribes—Slavs and Bulgars as well as Arabs. In the Balkans religious and educational institutions, more closely identified with the imperial court than in the Latin empire, were in disarray. Christianity, as practiced by a demoralized population, was in danger of becoming a miscellany of debased superstitions. Many found it intellectually and morally inferior to Islamic monotheism, with its firm insistence on holy writ and a strict taboo on images. (MacGregor and Langmuir: 85)

In 726 Emperor Leo III issued an edict prohibiting the use of images in public worship and throughout the Eastern empire mosaics and pictures were smashed. In Italy the appearance of these iconoclasts, as they were called, stirred the local population to ferocious opposition, which caused the loss of the Byzantine-held cities to the emperor. Pope Gregory II denounced Leo III's edict. Therefore, iconoclasm clearly became a phenomenon of the area ruled by the Byzantine emperor. In Western Europe everything continued as before.

In the following years the Catholic Church did its utmost to come to a solution. The Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787, also called the Second Council of Nicaea, came to the following declaration:

> We define that the holy icons, whether in colour, mosaic, or some other material, should be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on the sacred vessels and liturgical vestments, on the walls, furnishings, and in houses and along the roads, namely the icons of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, that of our Lady the Theotokos [Mother of God], those of the venerable angels and those of all saintly people. Whenever these representations are contemplated, they will cause those who look at them to commemorate and love their prototype. We define also that they should be kissed and that they are an object of veneration and honour (*timitiki proskynisis*), but not of real worship (*latreia*), which is reserved for Him Who is the subject of our faith and is proper for the divine nature. The veneration accorded to an icon is in effect transmitted to the prototype; he who venerates the icon, venerated in it the reality for which it stands. (Website of the *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America*; for more detail see Denzinger 2001: 276–278)

The struggle flared up again in 817, but in 843 Empress Theodora convened a new synod, this time in Constantinople. This synod reconfirmed the decisions of the Second Council of Nicaea (Denzinger 1952: 343,

no. 986) and this time the conflict was truly ended (MacGregor and Langmuir: 85).

It is also important to understand that the category of icons include only two-dimensional images, not three-dimensional ones, since the depiction is not a reflection of reality but of an ideal. This condition guaranteed that an icon was not the same as an idol, since most idols at the time were three-dimensional.[24] So, although the conflict was over, there was still an important difference in attitude towards images between what is called Eastern or Orthodox Christianity (the churches of Greece, the Balkans, Russia and the Middle East) and Western Christianity (the churches of Western Europe). In Eastern Christianity Christians continued to distinguish between religious images, which were permitted only under the restrictions mentioned above, and other kinds of pictures, whereas Western Christianity enjoyed freedom in this regard.

In the 16th century Western Christianity went through a deep crisis, resulting in a new division between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The Protestants began to read the Bible anew and gave the Bible, the Tanakh as well as the New Testament, a more central place in Christian life. It was expected that every Christian would read the Bible, and the liturgy in the churches was structured around the reading and exegesis of the Bible. More than before, attention was paid to the Tanakh, including the Ten Commandments, which from now on structured the life of the faithful, especially in churches of Calvinist background. This led to a taboo on images in the interiors of the churches; they were permitted outside the churches, but inside they would tempt the believers into idolatry. Although images were permitted outside the church buildings, many Calvinist believers did not feel comfortable with images of biblical characters in general and with those of Jesus Christ in particular. There was an absolute taboo on depictions of God, and therefore also, but less strictly, on those of Jesus. Nonetheless, although the painter Rembrandt lived in a Calvinist country he was free to make images of Jesus, since illustrated Bibles were permitted for pedagogical reasons, in particular for instruction of the illiterate and children. In church buildings, however, images were forbidden, because the church building was a place for prayer, so the temptation to direct the prayer to images—if

[24] Personal communication by Professor Dr. W.P. van den Bercken on 17 August 2007 (for more detail see Ouspensky and Lossky: 25–49).

they were present—was too great. Thus, images were considered to be on a lower level than words (Verbeek: 172). As a consequence, iconoclastic mobs also swept parts of Western Europe and many church buildings lost beautiful works of art. The iconoclast movement became more peaceful later: then it was the county and town administrators who removed images. But they did it neatly by, for example, hiding the frescoes under white lime and placing the images in other rooms and buildings or selling them to churches in regions of a more liberal climate (Kaptein; Kroesen and Steensma: 387–403).

The Calvinist Protestants gained much influence in Switzerland, parts of Germany, Hungary and the western part of contemporary Romania, the Netherlands and in large areas of Great Britain, and—what is important for the present study—later also in the United States of America and in most other former 'white' British colonies including Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They were also influential in South Africa. The Lutheran variety of Protestantism also felt some hesitation in depicting Jesus Christ but was more liberal. During the 20th century the attitude of the majority of the Protestants, including the majority of Calvinists, became more positive, but it is still common for Protestant church buildings to have no or only very few images. Opposition is still present. It is important to point out here that the Pentecostals and Evangelicals, a strong current in contemporary Christianity, mainly follow the Protestant tradition in its attitude towards depicting God, Jesus and sacred stories, although these Christians are generally more open towards modern media, including films.

The Roman Catholics did not change their views. Nonetheless, the Protestants did have some influence on them. In their defence of the presence of images in churches, the Catholics now also accentuated their pedagogical function, which put images on a lower level than words in Catholic circles as well (Verbeek: 172). Nonetheless, the attitude of the Catholics remained generally positive. Consequently, a large part of Western Christianity, especially countries where the Roman Catholic Church was predominant, had almost no problem with making images of God, Jesus and other biblical characters and subjects.

These developments are also important for the reception of Jesus films in the Christian world. Of course, it is not necessary to repeat what was already related in Chapter One. Nonetheless, it will come as no surprise that the first Jesus film was released in France, at that time a country with a large Roman Catholic population. On the other hand, it will also come as no surprise that at the beginning of the

20th century British censors stipulated that it was not appropriate for the complete figure of Jesus to be seen on the screen; the suggestion of his presence by the back of his head, his shoulder, etc. would be sufficient (Malone: 58). These rules were inherited from 19th-century theatre. In 1928 a special licence was granted for the London screening of DeMille's The King of Kings (Babington and Evans: 101). The United States did not have this tradition, possibly because of the popularity and influence of the illustrated Bibles of Tissot and Doré (Babington and Evans: 101), but the impact of the British attitude was visible in a series of movies released in the 1940s and 1950s, such as The Robe (Henry Koster, 1953) and Ben Hur (William Wyler, 1959). A so-called Production Code was devised in the United States. Chapter One already related how differently Protestants and Catholics dealt with this code, reflecting the divergent attitudes of both churches towards their members. In a Protestant church an individual is ultimately responsible for his own moral life, whereas in the Catholic Church the clergy promulgates rules. The Catholics participated in censorship, but the Protestants did not, although it was clear that the attitude of the Protestant ministers and theologians towards cinema was often also very negative. The members went their own way and the great majority visited cinemas. In the 1960s censorship lost its influence, although it still classifies films on the basis of the sex and the violence it contains. One of the reasons Mel Gibson's Passion was shortened and made slightly less violent in 2005 is that after these cuts it was given another rating, i.e. 'R'. So more viewers were given the opportunity to see the movie (Weldon: 13). Chapter One also mentioned that the attitude of the Protestants changed in the 1970s when they increasingly placed the Jesus films within the tradition of children's Bibles. The opening given to painters, including Rembrandt, already in 16th and 17th century developed into a channel for accepting the Jesus film. Many Protestants, especially those working in mission and among the youth, were even very eager to accept Jesus films, in particular the pictures that they appreciated, for use in their missionary work as well as in training youth (Bakker 2004: 313–314; Eshleman).

Nonetheless W. Barnes Tatum observed that there is still a difference between the Protestant and Catholic appreciation of Jesus films:

> Representatives of mainline, or liberal, Protestantism often evaluated Jesus films, and Jesus as portrayed in those films, on the basis of the film's social relevance and Jesus' humanness. Representatives of evangelical, or

> conservative, Protestantism were more concerned with the faithfulness of Jesus films to the biblical text and to Jesus' divinity.… Catholic reaction to Jesus films, at least by reviewers in Catholic publications, has reflected less concern for either social relevance or biblical faithfulness. Catholic reviewers seemed more comfortable than Protestants with Jesus on the screen as image—however provocative that moving image may have been. Reflected here, no doubt, is Catholicism's traditional appreciation for the sacred image of Jesus and his story. (Tatum: 233–234)

What Tatum does not mention is the importance of morality in the evaluation of Jesus films by Christians. An additional reason for Christians to oppose cinema was that film was associated with a lack of morality. They abhorred the depiction of immorality and pornography in film. Therefore, the evaluation of movies by theologians was often dominated by moral values at the expense of aesthetic or cultural ones (May). This is also applicable to Jesus films. The campaigns against THE LAST TEMPTATION show that, probably even today, the films that cause most upheaval and opposition, in particular among Pentecostals and conservative Christians, are those that associate Jesus with sex, since they are, in their view, the most blasphemous.

The conclusion of this section is that Christianity generally had a positive attitude towards depicting Jesus Christ in film, in particular after the 1970s when the Protestants altered their attitude. Nonetheless, it is good to be aware of the fact that within Christianity many people, in particular the Eastern Orthodox and Protestants, still have great difficulties with the idea of depicting the divine in a motion picture, in particular if this divinity is degraded by representations associating it with inhumanity and sex. Moreover, images are on a lower level than words. Thus, films are useful but always need verbal clarification and addition. However beautiful and faithful to the gospels a film may be, for Christians it will never attain the status of the Bible itself. The God who cannot be expressed in words can certainly not be reflected in images. Therefore Jesus, who was a man, can be depicted, and an actor playing him can be filmed, but each portrayal will fall short, since in the opinion of the orthodox and more conservative Christians, he must also give expression to the divine.

However obvious this may be, for a great number of Christians, especially conservatives and many theologians, a filmic portrayal will always be imperfect. Others see a theological challenge in the use of film.

One of them was Amédée Ayfre. He agreed that many filmmakers failed to give a true representation of the religious abundance found

in the religious texts they tried to depict. In his view, they would have had more success if they had produced films made in a style stamped by great rigor and anti-naturalism, for this would have been more in accordance with the method followed by the ecclesiastical liturgy and the Byzantine icons for evoking transcendence. In the course of the centuries these two forms had proven to be successful (Ayfre: 84–85 and 91–93).

The second was the Dutch Catholic theologian Marjeet Verbeek (b. 1960). Working from the ideas of Jozef B.M. Wissink (b. 1947), another Dutch Catholic theologian, she comes to certain conclusions with regard to film. She writes:

> According to Wissink, the beauty theologians search for and find in all sorts of creations, including film aesthetics, cannot be defined because beauty as well as truth and good are, theologically speaking, transcendentals, which means that they are characteristics of God and everything in creation that is ordered toward God. Beauty, though part of concrete and particular creations, at the same time transcends them and thus escapes definition. The theological notion of divine beauty in creation can, however, be circumscribed and this is what Wissink does.… Beauty in creation is what God makes things to be. This means that it is not simply a fact of life, but a gratuitous gift from God to creatures so that they will recognize beauty and create beautiful things, which means ordering them toward God. Beauty, therefore, depends on the human attitude towards his own creation and the creation surrounding him. (Verbeek: 174–175)

In Verbeek's view, Wissink subsequently explains that loving openness towards creation makes human beings able to 'experience' its beauty. Theologically, the experience of beauty is the result of a loving praxis that comes to rest in an aesthetic experience (Verbeek: 175). Hereafter she explains that in Wissink's approach to beauty

> there is finally no division between subject and object. All creatures are intersubjectively interconnected.… For this reason… the highly subjective realization of beauty in creation and the experience of that beauty in creation are at the same time highly objective realization and experience. (Verbeek: 176)

This creates a common ground between artists and the audience, including theologians (Verbeek: 176), which at the same time may become an opening for the mercy of God. In Verbeek's view, it is only natural that this also includes the production and viewing of films (Verbeek: 175–177).

The German Protestant theologian Inge Kirsner (b. 1963) follows a similar approach. She concentrates on the experience of deliverance and

concludes that a film is a mirror, a reflection of reality. It is a mirror of ourselves in our nakedness, but also a mirror of ourselves in the other in whom God can be found. In films we are confronted with ourselves, including our failures, but film can also be the moment that we see the Eternal face to face. God made Himself tangible in human beings and He is the one who made these images of human beings available to us. Those images are the theme of cinema and cinema is able to present these images in such a way that human being transcends him or herself (Kirsner: 282–283).

These last two theologians share the notion that experiences caused by cinematic images can develop into an opening for an encounter with God. The weak point of their approaches, just as with Aifre's suggestion, is that the viewer has to be a Christian in order to interpret his or her experience this way. Nonetheless, the approaches may be helpful in reconciling the contradictions many Christians still feel with regard to their faith and the world of cinema.

Another but completely different approach theologians use with regard to films, and in particular Jesus films, is followed by Reinhold Zwick and Thomas Langkau (b. 1970). They devise a number of criteria for good Jesus films. Zwick prefers a film based on one of the synoptic gospels, if necessary completed with material from one of the others. It is very important that it be clear beforehand which gospel is the main source of the picture, as with Pasolini's IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO, whose title already disclosed its background. Furthermore, the film has to provide correct information about the historical context as well as about the Jewish religious context. The biblical sources must be decisive for what will be presented, not the expectations of the audience or its desire for sensation. So miracles must be shown modestly, if possible, including their reference to the Kingdom of God. What happens after Jesus' burial can best be presented in symbols. The emphasis has to be on Jesus' life before the resurrection with an accent on what is unmistakably accepted by historical science (Zwick: 349–351).

Langkau agrees with Zwick to a great extent part but suggests presenting a miracle like the resurrection of Lazarus by a cut after Jesus' call 'Lazarus, come out!' and the events occurring after Jesus' own resurrection without showing Jesus himself. He also suggests introducing more spirituality into the movie by, for example, playing the meditative songs of the community of Taizé in France during the crucifixion sequences. In any event, Langkau argues for more meditative motion pictures about Jesus (Langkau: 188–191). With regard to the last suggestion, it

is, of course, a major question if such movies will find large audiences. Pasolini's GOSPEL proves that Zwick's suggestions have more chance of creating popular pictures, but even in this case a well-known producer will help to attract audiences to the cinema.

3.4. *The Issue of Anti-Semitism*

In 1916 certain Jewish groups, including B'nai B'rith, objected to D.W. Griffith's INTOLERANCE which consisted of four short stories, one of them being the crucifixion of Jesus. According to the filmmaker this event was the result of intolerance in his time and culture. B'nai B'rith objected to Griffith's depiction of Jews crucifying Jesus and the film was consequently drastically edited before its release. W. Barnes Tatum writes: 'Griffith the opponent of censorship censored himself' (Tatum: 43). DeMille also decided to give in and made some alterations to the original version, which was signalled in a brief news article in *The New York Times* of 6 January 1928 (Tatum: 58). Every viewer of THE KING OF KINGS can see, however, that the director had done his utmost to prevent the film from being accused of being anti-Semitic. One of the most impressive examples[25] of his attempts is the following scene not found in any of the gospels. Caiaphas sees how the veil of the temple in Jerusalem is rent and even catches fire after Jesus' death. He falls on his knees and prays: 'Lord God Jehovah, visit not Thy wrath on Thy people Israel—I alone am guilty.'

In all features subsequently released in the US the filmmakers tried to avoid the accusation of anti-Semitism. However, before we continue, we should point out that there were two issues, the first one of which is the danger of a filmmaker being accused of anti-Semitism, in particular in the United States, and the second, already discussed in section 3.1, is the astonishing fact that Jewish actors were never asked to play Jesus.

It transcends the scope of the present study, of course, to present an outline and analysis of anti-Semitism throughout the ages. Only some points that demand attention with regard to the Jesus films will be discussed here.

Concerning the first issue, the threat of a lawsuit, it is good to point out that parts of the New Testament themselves are regarded as anti-Judaist. In particular, the gospel of John uses the very general term

[25] For his other attempts see: Barnes Tatum: 59.

'the Jews' in various texts (see, for example, John 2:18 and 20; 7:1, 13, 15 etc.) and Jesus says to the Jews in John 8:44: 'You belong to your father, the devil.' The motif that Jews are children of the devil played a prominent role in Christian anti-Semitism. Examples of this can be found in the works of the church father Origen (d. around 254) or the Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) (Motyer: 2–3; Schreckenberg: 132–137, 235). Another text playing an ominous role was Matthew 27:25, where the crowd cries before Pilate: 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' (Schreckenberg: 129–131). This verse was already used by the church father Tertullian to underline the responsibility of the Jews themselves for the angry attitude of Christians (Tränkle: 19–20). In later times this text was often the reason for raids on local Jewish communities after the church services during Holy Week and Easter (Graus: 275–281).

For long a time in Europe Jews were permitted to work only in financial professions (Graus: 352–376; Pawlikowski: 17, 23). Therefore they were often associated with money and were regarded as greedy. The image of the greedy Jew with a long bent, hooked nose is widespread. Films deal with images—how did they represent the Jews?

A final issue was the problem that, according to all gospels, the Jewish religious leaders, including Caiaphas, were involved in the activities leading to the crucifixion of Jesus. Would it be possible to produce Jesus films claiming to give an authentic representation of Jesus' life but at the same time omitting utterances and situations that could be experienced as too anti-Semitic?

The filmmakers wrestled with this issue and found different means for avoiding the accusation of anti-Semitism. DeMille did so by placing all responsibility for the condemnation of Jesus on the shoulders of Caiaphas. Furthermore, he mentions the trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin only in an intertitle. It is not shown in visual representations, so the court procedures are omitted almost completely. Others, including From the Manger to the Cross, Nicholas Ray's King of Kings and The Last Temptation, omitted the whole scene. In these movies Jesus is sentenced to death only by the Romans, by Pilate and in many cases by him only after a great deal of resistance. Finally, there are movies, such as Stevens' Greatest Story, Zeffirelli's Jesus of Nazareth and Gibson's Passion, that show the trial but include some scenes of Jewish leaders defending Jesus, Nicodemus often being one of them. In this way these directors conveyed the view that not all Jews wanted to condemn Jesus to death.

Something remarkable occurred with regard to Matthew 27:25. The two Italian films produced by Pasolini and Rosselini do include the words 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!', although in both it is only one voice that actually says them. In Pasolini's GOSPEL it remains unclear who speaks the words since the film does not show who it is. In Rosselini's MESSIA they are said by one of the priests. Of course, this de-emphasized its impact, because, according to the gospel of Matthew, it is the people—or a crowd, at any rate—who say these words. In Rosselini's picture it is not the people, the Jews themselves, who ask that Jesus' blood to be upon them and their children but only one priest. In Mel Gibson's PASSION the sentence is shouted by the crowd in Aramaic, but the English translation in the subtitles is omitted. All the other biopics of the sixteen films explored in the present study left the verse out. One can conclude that the producers of Italian pictures felt less need to be careful than those making American features, since in all American Jesus films in our selection the verse is omitted or, as in the case of Gibson's PASSION, only indirectly represented in a language the great majority of Americans do not understand. There is at least one exception, an American film outside the selection used for the present book, MATTHEW, produced by Robert Marcarelli for The Visual Bible in 1993: this picture has the verse. As stated above, MATTHEW is a kind of film version of the illustrated Bible. The goal of The Visual Bible and its successor Visual Bible International is to provide Bible films with the complete texts of the gospels. Therefore, it was very difficult for them to omit Matthew 27:25, but their intention probably saved them from lawsuits, since giving the whole text of a gospel cannot be regarded as a sign of anti-Semitism. If this was the case, all Bible or gospel editions would have to be destroyed.

One picture, THE GOSPEL OF JOHN by Philip Saville, includes the other ominous verse in the gospels, John 8:44, which suggests that the Jews are children of the devil. In fact, it is only natural that this verse be included since this feature is, as was pointed out earlier in section 2, one of the Jesus films based on the text of a gospel. Therefore, it would be strange if these words were omitted. Two pictures, Stevens' GREATEST STORY and Gibson's PASSION, seem to use this verse as well, but they only give the impression that they do so, copying some scenes that had already appeared in THE LIFE AND THE PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST released by Pathé Frères at the beginning of the 20th century. In this picture a person dressed in a black-and-white striped robe takes charge in such a way that Jesus is sentenced to be crucified.

One of the things he does is stand in the midst of the crowd watching Jesus while he is standing before Pilate and suddenly initiates the cry 'Crucify him, crucify him'. This film, however, does not contain the sequence of the temptation of Jesus in the desert, so it is impossible to identify this person as the devil.

A similar character figures in THE GREATEST STORY and THE PASSION. In THE GREATEST STORY this person is the same as the devil who previously tempts Jesus in the desert. This makes the devil responsible for Jesus' death. My impression is that exactly this is what Stevens wanted (see also Zwick: 288–290), but at the same time people following a less Jewish-friendly interpretation can regard the sequence as an illustration of what is said in John 8:44, because the Jews follow what the devil initiates. In Gibson's movie this person, who is also the devil, is merely there and participates in what is occurring, including the shout 'Crucify him'. Gibson probably had another motive for introducing the devil. He based his picture partly on the visions of Anna Katharina Emmerick, which also speak of appearances of the devil during Jesus' passion (Langkau: 84–85). Finally, it must not be forgotten that in Gibson's picture the devil is seen not only among Jews but also among the Roman soldiers scourging Jesus.

The last issue is the blond, blue-eyed Jesus. This issue was, however, already sufficiently discussed in section 3.1. My impression is that most filmmakers who selected the actors to play Jesus were not acquainted with the implications this representation of Jesus had had in Germany during the period before and during World War Two, although there is certainly reason for Telford's astonishment that producers claiming to give an authentic and faithful reflection of the story of the gospels never thought about selecting a Jewish man for the role. Various other factors often played an important role in the way of selecting actors to play Jesus, such as the dignity of the actor, the way he played his role, his appearance, etc. In section 3.2 it was related how Zeffirelli had the feeling that the actor was indicated by a mysterious external power.

Producing a Jesus film is a risky enterprise. Millions will be influenced by the representation given of the material in the gospel. So it is no wonder that the discussions about possible anti-Semitism flare up at the announcement of the release of a new Jesus film. Nonetheless, the conclusion is justified that almost all producers were very careful. No truly anti-Semitic Jesus films are found among the sixteen selected for the present study. The danger is rather the reverse, that fifteen of the Jesus films explored in the present study tend to be less 'anti-Semitic'

than the gospels themselves and ignore the responsibility of parts of the Jewish elite for what happened to Jesus. The only exception is Pasolini's GOSPEL, but, remarkably, this film was not criticized for its anti-Semitism but for its critique of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Pasolini was not afraid either of letting the crowd cry 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' or of giving a less positive representation of the Jewish religious leaders. His negative depiction is not, however, associated with the Jewish leaders mentioned in the gospels but with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps this also explains the power of his movie: he shows the harshness and sharpness of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders but apparently in such a way that no spectator feels a religious chasm between the two parties. Jesus and the Jewish leaders belong to the same religious world. Perhaps that is its difference from some other Jesus films, including DeMille's THE KING OF KINGS and Gibson's PASSION. The appearance and their presentation of the Jewish religious leaders recall the prejudices that existed about Jews for centuries—they have long hooked noses and are greedy—which make them completely different from their nice and friendly opponent who has the features of a Roman or Anglo-Saxon or German man. The framing of the film narrative in the Hollywood structure of creating an antagonism between the good hero and the bad guys may also play a negative role. Nonetheless, these points of critique are too shallow to justify the conclusion that these two directors created anti-Semitic films. The complete pictures show insufficient reason for such a conclusion.

4. MANY IMAGES, ONE JESUS

The Jesus film originated in the passion plays, but with the release of FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS in 1912 it started to develop into the biopic it became for the first time in Cecile B. DeMille's THE KING OF KINGS. The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s saw the release of many Jesus features, the first ones still following the pattern of classical narration usual in Hollywood, but since 1969 also—although only in a small minority—using the pattern of what David Bordwell defined as art-cinema narration. Filmmakers thus attempted to bring Jesus' subjectivity to the screen, in particular his doubts and despair, thus emphasizing his humanity. In the beginning of the 1970s there was the influence of the hippy scene, resulting in two musical films presenting

Jesus surrounded by friends following him as a hippy guru. Halfway through the 1970s the Jewish background of Jesus received attention. At the same time there was also a final attempt to create a historically reliable biopic. The culture changed, however, so that later Jesus films had less difficulty with miracles and miraculous and mysterious events. The last Jesus film followed classical narration again but had also been influenced by the genre of the horror film.

The influence of the church has been tremendous, particularly in the first six decades of the history of the Jesus film. It was a publishing house closely related to the Roman Catholic Church that produced the first Jesus movie. In 1912, however, Pope Pius X made some restrictions, whereas in this same decade the British censors, probably influenced by British church leaders, decided that it was not appropriate for the figure of Jesus to be seen fully on-screen. For the most part, Protestants were even more hesitant about the depiction of Jesus than Catholics were. By the end of the 1950s the attitude of the Catholic leaders had become more open, and later, at the end of the 1970s, the great majority of the Protestant leaders followed. The possibility of using the films they appreciated in missionary work and for instruction of the youth won many of them over. Christians, however, had been going to the cinemas for many years already. The attitude of the leading personalities reflects the opposition in the church to the depiction of Jesus. It was probably not before the 3rd century that the first pictures of Jesus were made. The impact of the Tanakh forbidding the making of any image at all because of the danger that it would develop into an idol was great. Although there was a great variety in the way Jesus was portrayed in the first centuries, a certain unification developed. Jesus became depicted usually as a man with dark hair and a trimmed moustache and beard. This image proclaimed that he was the only Almighty God, religiously as well as politically.

On the theological front, a similar development was taking place. Whereas the New Testament includes a certain variety of images of Jesus or christologies, one of them developed into the most important, dominating over even almost excluding all others. It was the ideological or theological image that gradually became manifest at the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. Chalcedon ultimately declared that Jesus was *vere deus, vere homo*, truly God and truly human.

The Byzantine Empire turned out to be very influential on both the visual and the ideological or theological delineation of these two images, so that it is possible to define the classic orthodox image of Jesus as a

Byzantine image. This image had a tremendous influence on the Jesus biopics, since almost all of them complied with it, certainly the most popular ones. The only other motif granted a place in the most popular films was that of Jesus as the suffering servant.

That the filmmakers made accommodations to this pictorial image was deliberate, since the great majority of the people living in countries dominated by Christianity and Christian culture sincerely believe that this was Jesus' real appearance. At least they do not know what else it was. Some less popular features also presented different portrayals of Jesus' character by laying emphasis on his humanity and his wavering. In these films more uncommon views of Jesus were given their chance.

Strikingly, the role of Jesus was never played by a Jewish man. Many filmmakers claimed that their films were truly faithful to the historical and religious reality of Jesus' life, but the idea of choosing a Jewish actor to play Jesus did not enter their minds. On the contrary, the appearance of most actors playing Jesus was very Anglo-Saxon or Roman. The blond blue-eyed Jesus was no exception. This is all the more remarkable given the continuous threat of being accused of anti-Semitism, especially in the United States. The theological developments in German Protestantism showed the dangers of cutting the ties between Jesus and his people.

But the threat of being accused of anti-Semitism made many filmmakers careful. They tried to prevent giving the impression that the responsibility for the death of Jesus was be imputed entirely to on the Jewish people and devised various methods of de-emphasising this responsibility. Therefore, the conclusion is justified that the Jesus films are less anti-Semitic than the New Testament itself, the only exception being Pasolini's Il Vangelo secondo Matteo. Pasolini proved to be able to present the sharpness of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders without creating a religious chasm between the two parties.

In conclusion, it may be said that the most popular and most influential Jesus biopics were those that remained very close to the traditional and orthodox ideas and views of Jesus. In Ayfre's view, the intention of creating orthodox portrayals could be caused by the filmmakers' intention to conceal their possible failure in truly representing the religious abundance found in the religious texts they tried to depict. But in Chapter One we mentioned another important reason, namely that it is very expensive to produce a film. A film has to earn money and must, therefore, be a box-office success. But to be that means that filmmakers have to take the expectations of the audiences into account.

This increases the power of the church, in particular those with large memberships, for if the leaders of those churches speak out against the film, their project may end as a financial disaster. So it is, in fact, no surprise that the most successful pictures are those that present a traditional image of Jesus. Only very popular filmmakers can attempt to take a chance. Martin Scorcese's attempt was a disaster, but Mel Gibson's was successful, probably also because his feature displayed a very traditional image of Jesus.

CHAPTER THREE

RAMA

In India the era of film started on 7 July 1896, only eight months after the first screening of movies in Berlin. A representative of the Lumière brothers organized this first film show in Mumbai (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 1–3). The first Indian to produce and show films was Harischandra Sakharam Bhatvadekar who showed a film in the same city of a wrestling match in 1897 shot one year earlier. Bhatvadekar later produced more films and became very successful; when he died he had amassed 'quite a fortune' (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 6–7).

The devout Brahman Hindu Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (1870–1944), also known as Dadasaheb Phalke, went to the *American-Indian Cinema* in Mumbai at Christmas 1910 to see The Life of Christ. It is not very clear which Jesus film is meant here, but in section 1.2 of Chapter Two it was suggested that it was probably one of the versions of The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ, produced by Ferdinand Zecca and Lucien Nonguet.[1] Phalke stated later:

> While the *Life of Christ* was rolling fast before my eyes I was mentally visualizing the gods, Shri Krishna, Shri Ramachandra, their Gokul and Ayodhya.… Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen? (Rajadhyaksha: 48)

So, it is no exaggeration to conclude that the Jesus films initiated the production of religious feature films by the Indians themselves, in particular the so-called mythologicals, a genre which according to Rachel Dwyer

> depicts tales of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines mostly from the large repository of Hindu myths, which are largely found in the Sanskrit *Puranas*, and the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The early mythological genre drew on a wide range of the modern and

[1] I am relying here on the information given in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy's *Indian Film* (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 9 and 11), but there is a less probable possibility that it was The Life of Christ made by the French filmmakers Alice Guy, Victor Jasset and George Hatot in 1906. But the information provided by Barnouw and Krishnaswamy suggests that it was the movie by Zecca and Nonguet.

> the traditional to create its own distinctive hybrid style, with strong connections to 19th-century Indian popular and middlebrow public culture as well as with other forms of cinema that were emerging at the same time in other places in the world. (Dwyer 2006a: 15)

Phalke was not, however, the first person to produce a religious film in India, since R.G. Torney and N.G. Chitre released the film PUNDALIK on 18 May 1912, about Pundalik, a Hindu holy man completely devoted to the god Vishnu (Dwyer 2006a: 63–64; Gokarn: 8–9). Although certainly a religious picture, PUNDALIK is not regarded as a mythological but as a devotional. Dwyer defines devotionals as

> films about spiritual devotees (*bhaktas* and *sants*), drawing on India's rich premodern *bhakti* traditions. (Dwyer 2006a: 63)

Dwyer adds, however:

> Gokarn… notes that the generic definition of the devotional is not clear. Like other cinematic genres in India, the mixing or hybridity factor makes it hard to ascribe a film firmly to one category or another. Some may class mythologicals as devotionals as there is some overlap, especially with later films. (Dwyer 2006a: 63, see also Gokarn: 3)

The mythologicals and devotionals became popular all over the Indian subcontinent and are still produced in almost every important language of the country.[2]

Nearly one year later, on 3 May 1913, Dada Saheb Phalke released his first film, RAJA HARISCHANDRA (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 1–3; Dwyer 2006a: 22–23), about a good king who had to flee his palace with his consort and son because of a sage's anger. Shiva appears in order to save them and the family is restored to the throne. The feature lasts 15 minutes. Phalke's second and third features were both released in 1914. His next feature, LANKA DAHAN (LANKA AFLAME) was the first film in history to deal with Rama. It premiered in 1917 and it is said that 'when Rama appeared on the screen… men and women in the audience prostrated themselves before the screen' (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 15). The same thing happened when Krishna appeared on

[2] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson qualify the mythological and the devotional as film genres belonging to Hindi cinema (Bordwell and Thompson: 94), but there are also mythologicals and devotionals in other Indian languages including, for example, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi or Bengali. According to Dwyer, mythologicals even stood at the beginning of a pan-Indian non-regional style (Dwyer 2006a: 61).

the screen in Phalke's next film, SHREE KRISHNA JANMA (THE BIRTH OF SHREE KRISHNA), which was released in 1918. Firoze Rangoonwalla writes about the premiere:

> And appeal it did to all kinds of spectators seeing the big success it proved. The whole was a one and a half hour show, including Miss Irene Delmar (duet and dance), The McClements (comical sketch), Alexandroff (foot juggler) and Tip-Top comics.[3]

In the first section of the present chapter we will give a short introduction to the Rama films and subsequently analyze five Rama pictures that are considered by most to be the most important. After discussing the circumstances of their production, we will summarize their content and their reception, and then analyze and compare the portrayals of Rama in these films. The second section will focus on the relationship between these cinematic pictures and the way Rama is depicted in tradition. In the third section we will discuss the attitude Hindus have towards these films and towards depicting divine figures as such. In the last section we will make some preliminary observations.

1. THE FILMS

1.1. *A Short Introduction*

Phalke's activities earned him a great amount of money, so many other Indians followed him in producing mythologicals. Of course, the possibility of making a great deal of money was not the only motive for producing these features. For a number of them, their piety and desire to honour their god(s) by producing motion pictures as beautiful and faithful as possible prevailed over their more material desires (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 30–31; RAMAYAN: DVD 16). Nonetheless, many of them became rich through these films.

During the first decade of the Indian film industry, the mythologicals developed into the largest and most important section of this business. At the beginning of the 1920s the mythologicals even comprised 70% of all films produced in India. Later, however, the percentage decreased considerably to 40% in the early 1930s, fell to 22% in 1935, then to 10% in the next four decades and in the 1970s to no more than 3–9%

[3] Qouted in Beeman (Beeman: 82) from Firoze Rangoonwalla (1975), *75 Years of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Indian Book Company), p. 30.

(Gokarn: 82). The release of the RAMAYAN television serial in the 1980s gave new impetus to the popularity of the mythologicals, whereas Rachel Dwyer argues that the introduction of VCDs in the same decade gave new life to that genre (Dwyer 2006a: 61). 'Myth itself has an enduring popularity,' Dwyer writes (Dwyer 2006a: 57). In 2006 she stated that she saw an immense potential for the genre not only in the B circuit, where it continued to be popular, but also in the A circuit. In this context she also pointed to the overseas market (Dwyer 2006a: 61). As a resident of the Netherlands, a country with an important minority of Hindustani people, the present author can only underscore her argument. The situation in Great Britain confirms her observation.

The role of the Brahmans in this development must not be underestimated. Prominent producers of mythologicals, such as Phalke and Vijayshankar Jagneshwar Bhatt (1907–1993), were Brahmans themselves (Dwyer 2006a: 20). Nonetheless, there were also many filmmakers from other social backgrounds.

Since 1917 many films about Rama have been produced, but unfortunately most of them were lost. Moreover, many of these pictures were not produced in Mumbai but in the regional centres of film production in India. They became popular only in those regions. According to the American scholar Philip Lutgendorf, four pictures are considered to be the most important: Phalke's LANKA DAHAN, Vijay Bhatt's RAM RAJYA (The Rule of Rama) of 1943, Babubhai Mistri's (b. 1919) SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN (Complete Ramayana) of 1961, and RAMAYAN, the long serial broadcast on Indian TV from 1987 till 1988, produced by Ramanand Sagar (Lutgendorf 1990: 129, 132). Rachel Dwyer holds that Vijay Bhatt's BHARAT MILAP or BHARAT MET (Bharat's Meeting) of 1942 also belongs to this select group (Dwyer 2006a: 35). The following section will discuss these five films.

1.2. *The Era of Silent Film*

Lanka Dahan

It was stated above that LANKA DAHAN was the fourth film produced by Dadasaheb Phalke. According to Rachel Dwyer, it was Phalke's most popular film and was a huge success (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 14; Dwyer 2006a: 23 and 28).[4] The film was shot in Nasik, a town about

[4] Kusum Gokarn, however, asserts that two other films were the most successful ones, SATYAWAN SAVITRI (1914) and BHAKTA PRAHLAD (1926) (Gokarn: 13 and 15).

100 kilometres northeast of Mumbai. After the success of RAJA HARISCHANDRA, Phalke moved to this town and built a studio there, even though he did not shoot his films in the studio but in the real world. It was cheaper to operate a studio in Nasik, but there was probably a more religious reason for going to this town. There were sacred sites there, so space in Nasik was not ordinary space but divine space. Nasik includes Panchavati, where Rama, Sita and Lakshman lived during their exile in the forest (Dwyer 2006a: 24–25). So LANKA DAHAN was shot in a divine environment.

Unfortunately, only a 6-minute fragment (501 feet) of this motion picture has been preserved. The film was originally 3000 feet (Nair: 106), which means that the feature probably lasted nearly 40 minutes. So only 1/6 of the film has survived. It is a silent film consisting of short film sequences alternating with short texts composed by Phalke himself. Interestingly, the role of Rama as well as that of Sita, Rama's consort, were played by the same male actor, A. Salunke (Rangoonwalla: 20–21).

> The six minutes start with Sita who is weeping under a tree because Ravan, the demon king of Langka, abducted her from her husband and his brother Lakshman, and is holding her prisoner in the garden of his palace. Rama is far away and she longs for him. A monkey called Hanuman is sitting on one of the branches of the tree under which Sita is sitting and hears her weeping. In the next sequence, Sita walks around a pedestal and then leans on it, weeping, while Hanuman swings from one tree to another. At the same time a group of female guards are having a party, filling their cups from the jars nearby. One guard approaches Sita and starts to speak kindly to her.
>
> Ravan enters the park accompanied by a group of servants, two of whom are keeping him cool with large fans. Already from afar he expresses his amazement at Sita's beauty with a large gesture. He then passes the fountain and approaches Sita, followed by servants carrying plates loaded with beautiful presents. Hanuman is watching everything. Ravan takes a plate and offers it to Sita, but she turns her back to him when he approaches. He speaks to her in a friendly way, but she only heaps reproaches on him. Then Ravan offers Sita a beautiful chain, but she takes it and throws it on the ground. Meanwhile, Hanuman is watching everything. When Ravan kneels down at Sita's feet to offer her a plate with presents, she hits the plate so that it and all the presents fall to the ground. Leaning on the pedestal, Ravan tries to persuade her by speaking kindly to her. Sita, however, rejects all his advances and is very angry. Ravan's servants also appeal to Sita, but it is of no use, and in the end they leave her. But the servants return later to surround Sita and dance joyfully around her. Then one of them, Trijata, intervenes and sends them away, whereupon she also leaves Sita.

> Now Sita is completely alone and begins to weep. Hanuman moves noisily to and fro in the branches of the tree, jumping down and then climbing back into the tree again. Sita sits down on a stone table and weeps. At that moment Hanuman fetches a ring, examines it long and carefully and then throws it to the ground. Sita is shocked. She sees the ring, picks it up, and looks carefully at it. Her face brightens and she is filled with great happiness. Rama appears briefly in the above left corner of the screen; he looks satisfied and then disappears again. In the meantime, a guard passes by with a spear. Sita stands up out of joy and Hanuman jumps down from the tree and attacks the guard, snatching her spear which he then points menacingly at the guard. Sita is surprised. Using several gestures, Hanuman explains who he is. The text that was projected on the screen just prior to this states: 'I am Hanuman, a servant of Rama, come in search of you.' The last words of the only remaining fragment of this film are: 'End of Part One'.

The paintings of Raja Ravi Verma (d. 1906) were the models for the visual depiction of the divine characters in Phalke's films. Phalke had already had a long career in art before he became a filmmaker, having enrolled in the J.J. School of Art at the age of 15. This school was located in Mumbai and taught naturalist landscape painting and portraiture according to the principles of British academic art. He subsequently enrolled in a five-year programme in drawing and painting in Kalabhavan, Baroda, becoming quite proficient in nature studies and still lifes. He bought his first camera in 1890. When the principal saw the results of Phalke's photography, he sent him to Ratlam where he learned the processes of three-colour block making, photo-litho transfers, ceramics and techniques of darkroom printing. Phalke then earned a living by painting portraits and taking photographs. In 1901 he went to Lonavala where Raja Ravi Verma had started a litho-press already in 1894 to mass print pictures of popular gods and goddesses (Rajadhyaksha: 47–48; Dwyer 2006a: 22). According to Satish Bahadur, Ravi Verma 'conceived the Hindu pantheon in the lowest sentimental values of Victorian painting, which he popularized in cheap reproductions of his colour printing press'. It comes as no surprise, then, that the visual representation of his divine characters was strongly influenced not by traditional Ajanta or Rajput painting but by what Phalke had made while working for Ravi Verma's press (Bahadur: 91–92; for more details see Das Gupta: 20–23). Phalke left the press in 1909 to start his own press with a partner, but they soon fell out and Phalke resigned. It was at this point in his life that he saw The Life of Jesus (Rajadhyaksha: 48).

The appearance of the players was influenced not only by the pictures produced by presses like Raja Ravi Verma's but also by folk theatre. Hanuman's nose and mouth, for example, were covered by a mask giving his face the outward appearance of a monkey. Furthermore, it is known that the monkeys in LANKA DAHAN already had clubs (Video of the NFAI).

Folk theatre, in particular the Parsi theatre, also influenced greatly the acting and music in Phalke's films. The Parsi theatre was a form of theatre founded by Zoroastrians in Mumbai in the 19th century. The city contained many groups of Zoroastrians, and these groups became established in other Indian cities as well. Phalke's pictures were silent films, but we already stated in Chapter Two that this did not mean that it was silent in the cinemas. Indian silent film had musical accompaniment in accordance with the usual practice in the theatre, and it adapted its sets, costumes, performance styles and gestures (Dwyer 2006a: 16). In contrast to Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN of the 1980s, the acting in LANKA DAHAN is less formalized. Hanuman jumps and swings like a real monkey in the latter, whereas in Sagar's picture his behaviour more resembles that of a human being.

From the outset, music was also very important in Indian film. It was already stated above in this chapter that the premiere of RAJA HARISCHANDRA consisted, in fact, of a music and theatre show, of which only 15 minutes were devoted to the screening of the picture. William O. Beeman relates that in Indian film music was designed from the very beginning to appeal directly to public taste (Beeman: 86).

One of the problems with which Phalke had to deal was feminine modesty. The eye of the camera was regarded as a public eye, so he therefore started by asking men to play the female roles. But in 1914 he succeeded in attracting his first actress for his second film, although the role of Sita was again played by a man, Salunke.[5] Phalke was more successful in attracting women in the 1920s (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 20).

According to Satish Bahadur, Phalke did not delve deeply into the spiritual meaning of the story material he derived from the Hindu epics. Rather, he focused on their most obvious ritualistic and superficial level,

[5] Dwyer relates that this actress returned to the stage, where she, paradoxically, often played men (Dwyer 2006a: 23).

viz. the magical, the miraculous, and the spectacular in the exploits of the Hindu gods and goddesses (Bahadur: 91–92). Nonetheless, the appearance of Rama in the remaining part of the feature is interesting. He is present and sees everything when Sita rejoices at having received his ring and is satisfied. It is clear that Rama is not a normal human being but an omnipresent god who is still taking care of his wife, even though she is far away and believes that her husband is unaware of her misery. This scene is not found in the ancient texts, so it is clearly an interpolation by Phalke himself.

1.3. *The Era of Sound*

The era of sound started in India on 14 March 1931 with the release of Alam Ara (Beauty of the World) directed by Ardeshi Irani and produced by the Imperial Film Company (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 67; Website *IMDb*). William O. Beeman asserts that it was the coming of sound that really launched the Indian film industry in a big way, since it was largely the fact that this allowed music to be included directly in the films that made all the difference. As an element of performance, music is much more of an integral part of the film in India than it is in the West. In traditional Indian performance, vocal expression takes many forms, which, according to Beeman, can be exhibited in the following continuum: speech, dialogue, poetic recitation, intoned speech and song (Beeman: 82). Therefore, Barnouw and Krishnaswamy are right in their observation that sound made film capable of adjusting almost completely to the structure of traditional performance with its songs and dances (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 67–73).

> *Alam Ara* included about a dozen songs, another Hindi film is said to have had about a forty songs. An early Tamil film is said to have had over sixty songs. All the sound films produced in India in these early years had a profusion of songs. Most also had dances.… The Indian sound film, unlike the sound films of any other land, had from its first moment seized *exclusively* on music-drama forms. In doing so, the film had tapped a powerful current, one that gave it an extraordinary new impetus. It was a current that went back some two thousand years. (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 69)

For the present study, it is important to realize that this ancient tradition, which included music and drama, was a religious one, for the larger part of this by far was based on the narratives of the great Hindu epics including the Ramayana, the great story of Rama.

William O. Beeman also recalls that music began in Western film as an element separate from the film itself and was used in a supportive role. It was only later, with the introduction of the musical in Western cinema, that it became one of the composing elements of the film itself. In Indian film, on the contrary, music was designed from the very beginning to appeal directly to public taste: it was placed in the film to be heard. Here it occupied a role equal or even superior to all other elements of the film. Indian film music, which was often a combination of elements derived from Indian music and elements from the West, went even further. In the course of time, it became one of the most active elements in shaping musical taste (Beeman: 85–86). The dominance of music over the picture is underscored by the fact that the songs are often of a better quality than the film itself. They are also frequently the medium for a transcendental message or, even more, the medium in which the divine him- or herself speaks. In other words, songs are often the word of God (Das Gupta: 61–66).

In the course of the 1940s and the 1950s the developments in Indian cinema ended in what is regularly called the classic formula of Indian film: a star, six songs and three dances (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 155). There were often two stars, a man and a woman, who ultimately find happiness in their common mutual love.

Vijay Bhatt's Bharat Milap and Ram Rajya

Vijayshankar Jagneshwar Bhatt was the son of a Brahman railway guard in the small town of Palitana in Gujarat (Website *Vijay Bhatt, the Man, the Legend, 1907–1993*; Dwyer 2006a: 20). He enrolled in St. Xavier's College in Mumbai and acquired a diploma in Intermediate Science, after which he obtained a further diploma in electric lighting and traction from the International Correspondence Schools in London. A couple of years later he and his brother, Shri Shankarbhai, chose careers in show business after they met Ardeshir Irani, the director of Alam Ara, who asked both of them to join his business. In the early 1930s they founded the Royal Film Company so as to produce their own films. Vijay Bhatt developed into a noteworthy director. His first Rama film, Bharat Milap, was produced in 1942 and became popular throughout India (Website *Vijay Bhatt, the Man, the Legend, 1907–1993*; Dwyer 2006a: 34). As a result, Prem Adip and Shobhana Samarth (d. 2000), the stars who played Rama and Sita respectively, were for a long time identified completely with these divine figures (Gokarn: 23), despite the fact that Prem Adip was a Muslim (Aklujkar: 52).

> Adib and Samarth would often be picked up after the day's shooting by rich fans and taken home in costume and make-up, to be worshipped there by the women as Rama and Sita incarnate. People took of their shoes and fell on their knees while their films were on (Das Gupta: 165–166).

The credits mention both Valmiki's Ramayana and the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas (d. 1623) as sources.[6] Valmiki's Ramayana was written in Sanskrit, probably sometime between 200 BCE and 300 CE (Michaels: 39), whereas Tulsidas wrote his Manas, as the text also is called, in Hindi between 1574 and 1577 (R.C. Prasad: xii). It is important to realize that Tulsidas' version is not just a Hindi translation of Valmiki's Sanskrit version. The Manas is a new, completely revised edition in which the first two books are considerably elaborated and extended, whereas the content of the seventh and last book, the Uttarakanda, was changed fundamentally. Furthermore, many other details were altered. Although the main line of the story remains basically the same and a great deal of the material of older versions returns in the text, the Manas is, in fact, a completely new version of this ancient epic. So which of these two versions is used as the source for a certain episode can make a difference.

BHARAT MILAP is still a black-and-white film, lasting 170 minutes.

> It opens with a scene in which Bharat, Rama's younger brother, is sitting in a rocking chair and celebrating his birthday. Many offerings are made to the deities, but Bharat receives many presents as well. What he most appreciates is a present from Rama's mother Kaushalya, a small statue of Ram. He holds it against his cheek, cherishing it.[7] His own mother Kaikeyi is talking with her servant Manthara, who explains that she does not understand why Bharat is so lovingly devoted to his eldest brother. A few days later Bharat and his younger brother Shatrughan leave to go to their grandfather, Kaikeyi's father. Their father Dasharath is completely in love with Kaikeyi, but he suddenly remembers how he had killed a man by accident with an arrow long ago. The curse the victim's father pronounced over him resounds in his ears. After having consulted his priest and counsellor, Vashishtha, he decides to abdicate and to give the throne to his son Rama. When the news of Rama's enthronement is announced, Kaikeyi finds her servant Manthara crying on the floor of her

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[6] There is disagreement about Tulsidas' year of birth (Whaling: 222).

[7] It is, of course, impossible to relate all the details here. In this delineation only the details are given that are important for receiving a good impression of the portrayal of Rama given in this feature. Summaries of the first three films discussed in this chapter can also be found in Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen's *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* of 1999, pp. 243, 293 and 299.

room. Alarmed, Kaikeyi asks what is wrong, and Manthara reproaches her for not paying sufficient attention to the interests of her own son Bharat. She persuades Kaikeyi, and Kaikeyi in turn asks Dasharath to make Bharat king. Shocked, Dasharath falls on his divan. His crown falls from his head and flies to Bharat, who at that very moment is waking up from a horrible dream.

In the meantime preparations for the coronation ceremony for Rama and Sita have begun. When Dasharath does not come to attend the preparatory ceremonies, Vashishtha sends Sumantra, the minister, to find him. Sumantra finds Dasharath completely devastated: he cannot speak at all, except to mumble 'Ram, Ram, Ram.'[8] Kaikeyi says that Bharat, rather than Rama, is to be crowned king. When Rama hears what is going on, he goes to Dasharath, and when Kaikeyi tells him that Bharat is to be made king and that Rama is to go into exile, he is glad. His brother Lakshman, who has accompanied Rama, is very angry, however. Sita is also angry and takes the crown from her head. Rama attempts to calm everyone, including his mother Kaushalya, who is shocked. Sita now begs Rama to permit her to accompany him into exile and Rama eventually gives in, because she is very insistent. Lakshman will also go with them. The people of the city of Ayodhya are angry when they are informed about the new developments in the royal palace.

When Rama, Sita and Lakshman appear in the streets of the capital the inhabitants cheer Rama. Just before their departure, Manthara comes to bring the clothes of a *sadhu* or Hindu ascetic. She wants Sita to wear the simple dress of the ascetics as well. Again, Lakshman becomes angry and, again, Rama calms him down. When they leave the city of Ayodhya Dasharath dies in the presence of his two other consorts, Kaushalya and Sumitra, the mother of Lakshman and Shatrughan. Far away in his grandfather's residence, Bharat has a nightmare. He decides to go home.

In the meantime, Rama and the others come to the Ganges, thus reaching the border of the kingdom. Nishada, who reigns over a small kingdom on the other side, welcomes him and his retinue. They organize a great festival with music and dance and Nishada even offers Rama his kingdom, but Rama refuses. Accompanied by Sita and Lakshman, Rama gets into a boat that will bring them to the other side of the Ganges. Full of joy and thankfulness, the ferryman washes the feet of Rama and then he and his wife and some friends sing a song full of devotion.

When Bharat and Shatrughan arrive at the palace in Ayodhya, Manthara and Kaikeyi welcome Bharat gladly and shout that he will become king.

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[8] Ram is the Hindi form of the Sanskrit Rama. The present study follows the Indian films in using the Hindi names except for Rama, since he is known by this Sanskrit name in the age-old tradition both within and outside of India (see section 2.2). Sita's name has the same form in both languages.

Bharat discovers shortly afterwards that his father has died. He then goes to the balcony of the palace and, when he appears, the people gathered in the square before the building jeer at him. Bharat talks to them and eventually they cheer him up. Then Bharat talks to Kaikeyi and confronts her regarding what she has done. Kaikeyi discusses this with Manthara and subsequently sends her servant away, after which Kaikeyi goes to Kaushalya, who has built a shrine on which she has placed a pair of Rama's sandals. After a long dialogue Kaushalya is able to let Kaikeyi return to the *bhakti* (devotion) to Rama. Kaikeyi is also now mumbling 'Ram, Ram, Ram' continuously.

Bharat has decided to find Rama so as to convince him to return to Ayodhya to become king. He is accompanied by Sumantra and several of the inhabitants of Ayodhya. When the crowd approaches the border, Nishada threatens to kill Bharat to prevent him from attacking Rama. The situation is very dangerous, but Bharat suddenly begins to laugh and then Nishada understands that Bharat is not Rama's enemy but his devotee.

The retinue crosses the river. In the meantime Rama, Sita and Lakshman hear that Bharat is approaching. Lakshman becomes very angry, gets his bow and an arrow and sets out to kill Bharat before the latter kills Rama. Rama stops him and goes to meet Bharat alone. Bharat also comes alone and, when they meet, they embrace. Bharat tells Rama that their father has passed away and they perform the final part of the funeral rites together. Rama then states that he will not return to Ayodhya to ascend the throne. Thereupon Bharat leaves Rama and wanders through the forest, eventually coming to a waterfall, where he considers committing suicide. Suddenly, however, Rama becomes disturbed. He starts to search for Bharat and finds him on a stone at the top of the waterfall. At the same moment Bharat sees Rama's face in front of him, which tells him 'Don't jump.' Shortly afterwards the brothers are talking to each other. Then Bharat has an idea and asks Rama for his sandals. Because Bharat insists, Rama takes off his sandals to give them to him. Bharat raises them up to his face and worships them. When he returns to Ayodhya, Bharat decides to live in a hermitage and places Rama's sandals on a throne and subsequently performs *puja* (a worship and offering ceremony) for them. The statue he was given on his birthday is placed next to the throne.

A text in English, Urdu and Hindi appears on the screen announcing that 14 years have passed by. A celestial chariot flies over transporting Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman. A large crowd cheers them and Bharat leaves his hermitage as well. The chariot descends and Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman get out. Then Rama embraces Bharat and Sita strokes him tenderly on the head. The people around them sing and are jubilant. After the last song, the eleventh, the four brothers appear on the screen and subsequently Dasharath's three consorts, including Kaikeyi, sing the song of praise 'Ram, Ram, Raja Ram' (King Rama) to honour the new king. Harmony is visibly restored. The last image shows Rama and Sita, dressed in their official robes, sitting on their thrones in Ayodhya.

The style of the film, even though it is in black and white, is magnificent, because in some sequences Vijay Bhatt makes splendid use of one of the special possibilities black-and-white film offers. Such a picture can imitate traditional shadow theatre, because the presentation of the images of Rama, Sita and Lakshman roaming through the forests after they have crossed the Ganges makes it seem as if one is watching a shadow play rather than a movie. The contrast of the shadows sharpens when the conflict between Bharat and Nishada gradually reaches a threatening climax, which is indicated by the increasingly sharpening black shadows of the weapons both parties point ominously at each other. Other shots, such as those of the meeting between Rama and Bharat, when Bharat comes to ask Rama to return to Ayodhya, are beautiful as well.

The feature includes eleven songs. Dwyer indicates that the grand song of this film is 'Aya Ram Rajya' (The rule of Rama has come). In 1942, when the British still ruled India, Mahatma Gandhi used the term *Ram Rajya* as an announcement of the righteous rule that would dawn with the advent of India's independence. Therefore, this feature may also be seen as Vijay Bhatt's contribution to inspiring the Indians in their struggle for a new independent India.

More than Lanka Dahan, Bharat Milap is a film about emotion. The songs evoke emotion and the characters are overwhelmed from time to time by emotion. The only one who is not victim of his emotions is Rama, but this does not mean that he has no emotion at all: he is filled with feelings of kindness and solicitude, in particular towards Sita and Bharat.

Already one year later, in 1943, Vijay Bhatt released another film about Rama, again a black-and-white one, called Ram Rajya (The Rule of Rama).[9] This feature also won the hearts of the great majority of the Indian spectators at that time. It was also the only film Mahatma Gandhi—who had a very low opinion of cinema—ever saw (Dwyer 2006a: 37). The roles of Rama and Sita are again played by Prem Adip and Shobhana Samarth.

The credits of this picture, which lasts 132 minutes, mention the following texts as its sources: Valmiki's Ramayana, Tulsidas' Ramcaritmanas and Bhavbhutt's Uttar Ramcharit. Probably it is the 10th-century

[9] The film is now available in colour on DVD, but it can be clearly seen that it was originally a black-and-white film to which colour was added later.

Uttararamacarita that is meant here. This text, composed by a certain Bhavabhuti, does indeed contain the story of Sita's banishment from Rama's court (Whaling: 97). But the director must not have used very much material from Tulsidas' Ramcaritmanas. The content of the Uttarakanda, the last book of the Ramayana, which provides the material for this feature, is completely different in the Manas. This work says only that Sita gave birth to twins, two boys called Lava and Kusha. Basically, the picture follows the content of Valmiki's Uttarakanda and probably that of Bhavabhuti's Uttararamacarita. This does not mean that the mention of Ramcaritmanas in the credits of Bharat Milap is incorrect, since much that is presented in Bharat Milap corresponds to the content of the Manas. Nonetheless, the conclusion is justified that the filmmaker took some liberties in using the material in these works. We should present a more elaborated summary of the film so as to get a modified picture of Vijay Bhatt's portrayal of Rama.

> Ram Rajya starts where Bharat Milap left off: Rama and Sita are sitting on their thrones in Ayodhya. In the next sequence Rama performs *puja* for the sun god and for his royal ancestors, and then Valmiki's hermitage is shown. Valmiki praises Rama to his students, sending one of them to the palace in Ayodhya to inform the king that he has almost finished his Ramayana and is prepared to recite it before him. Meanwhile, Kaushalya and the other ladies of the royal court are very glad and sing a song for Sita, because she is pregnant.
>
> In the city, a laundryman angrily banishes his wife from his house—stating that he is not like the king who tolerates an unfaithful spouse in his palace. Everyone knows that Sita lived in a park near the palace of the king of Langka, so she must have committed adultery, according to many inhabitants of Ayodhya. A soldier hears the man speaking and arrests him. In the meantime, Sita tells Rama that she wishes to visit Valmiki's hermitage, since it would be good for her while she is pregnant. Rama gives his approval. Then they hear a woman crying, and the king orders his servants to bring her before him. The woman asks for shelter, since her husband has thrown her out of her home. She is given a place to stay in the palace and the king promises to talk to her husband the next morning. The following day the laundryman is brought before the high council of the king which consists of his ministers and his advisors. The priest Vashishtha presides over the council since the king is absent—Rama decided to hear the deliberations secretly behind a curtain. When he learns the laundryman's opinion of Sita, he is shocked and goes to the hall containing the statues of his ancestors. Suddenly, the statues begin to speak, saying that he must listen to the voice of the people, for the well-being of the people is more important than his own. He then orders his brother Lakshman to get the cart ready to take Sita to Valmiki's hermitage. In the

meantime, Valmiki's student enters to give him his master's blessings, but Rama replies that the Ramayana is not yet finished. Rama then ascends his throne and consults Lakshman who says that he must pay no heed to the wishes of the people. Then Rama says: 'I already abandoned Sita. She must depart before sunrise.' Lakshman is bewildered, for Rama is still very sad. Then Lakshman declares: 'It is not for Rama that she has to leave, but for King Rama.' Lakshman refuses to take Sita to the ashram, and Rama finally commands him to do so.

Just before sunrise Sita wakes up. She wishes to bid farewell to her husband, but the king keeps the doors of his room closed. Completely devastated, she gets into the cart. When they near the hermitage, Lakshman and Sita get down and Sita asks Lakshman why Rama is behaving this way. Lakshman answers: 'Not Rama, but King Rama abandoned his wife.' Sita says: 'Does the king not have any obligation towards his wife? Does a wife not have any rights?' Lakshman replies: 'The king is sad as well, because he had to abandon his wife to make his people happy.' Lakshman passes her crown to her, but Sita refuses it and sends him away. She then runs into the forest towards the river, wanting to drown herself, but at that very moment a sage—Valmiki—appears. He says that the kingship of Rama and his lineage shines because Rama sacrificed his wife; it was unjust for him as well. Subsequently Valmiki asks her what she wants to do with her responsibility for her children. Sita promises to fulfil her obligation as a queen to take care of her children, but the people of Ayodhya defiled her reputation. Valmiki says that one day the people of Ayodhya will pay. He offers Sita shelter in his ashram and Sita agrees on the condition that her name be kept secret.

Sita moves into the hermitage, taking the name Vandevi. Shortly afterwards she gives birth to twins, calling them Lava and Kusha. In the ashram the boys are given a good education in spiritual and military affairs. From time to time the boys ask about the identity of their father, but Sita refuses to provide clarity, although she does reveal that he is a king.

In Ayodhya the priest Vashishtha advises the king to perform the *ashvamedha* ritual. Part of this ceremony is that a horse be allowed to roam throughout the kingdom followed by an army regiment. The regiment has to defend the horse from everyone who tries to stop it. There is, however, one problem. The king has no consort to assist him in the ceremony. When Rama is advised to take another wife, he refuses, claiming that no other woman can take Sita's place. Instead, he has a golden statue of Sita made and placed next to him when he performs the rituals. After the introductory offerings, the priests and the king dedicate a horse to perform the ritual. It is decided that Lakshman will command the regiment that will follow the horse. The horse goes away, and Lakshman follows the animal in a cart.

Meanwhile, the sage Valmiki gives instructions to Lava and Kusha. They are to recite the Ramayana, which is now complete, in the city of

Ayodhya. The two adolescents go to Ayodhya shortly afterwards. They sing the song that they say has been written with a woman's tears and give a summary of the Ramayana. They are invited to recite the epic in the king's audience hall. They continue their recitation, but when they start to sing about Sita's exile, a minister intervenes. But Rama says that they must continue. They do so, and many people in the audience are no longer able to hold back their tears. Even the laundryman cries. When they sing about the victory of Rama and Hanuman over Lanka, Rama is overcome with pride. The song ends, however, with raising the important question of why the *ashvamedha* ritual is being performed without the king's consort. 'Where is Sita?' they sing. An unpleasant silence descends on the audience, and the laundryman himself is silent.

After some time the king asks the young princes who taught them this song and who they are. They reveal that they are Lava and Kusha, the sons of Vandevi, and that they learnt the song from the sage Valmiki. They also declare that they are glad to have met King Rama, but they wonder why the queen is absent. Rama asks if they know the remaining part of the song, and they reply that they do not. Rama says that he wishes to meet the goddess Sita and then he shows them the statue of the queen. 'Is this Sita?' they ask. The king quickly leaves the audience hall, followed by a minister. The priest Vashishtha then approaches Lava and Kusha and asks them if Valmiki did not tell them that the king had abandoned the queen. 'For a sin?' the twins ask. 'No, for the well-being of the people', Vashishtha replies. They then turn to the people and ask how this was possible, subsequently declaring: 'Don't you know that this woman is an example for the world? Is it not a shame that this woman has to suffer for your well-being and that your well-being counted more than the well-being of the king? Look at the king's sadness!' The people are completely silent. 'Why are you so silent?' the young men ask. They decide to go back to the forest and later tell Valmiki that they are unwilling to live among beautiful people with so much evil in their hearts.

In the meantime, the horse is roaming through the world. Suddenly, it approaches Valmiki's ashram. Lava catches the animal and one of the other inhabitants of the hermitage warns Vandevi. Vandevi runs to her sons and tells them to release the horse, otherwise they will have to fight King Rama. Lava and Kusha reply that they are not afraid; they have been given sufficient instruction and they are the sons of a king as well. How can Rama be a good king if he abandoned his wife? Then Sita runs to Valmiki and tells him everything, but Valmiki only says: 'This day is good. My heart will find peace.'

The regiment under Lakshman's command starts to fight and Valmiki meditates. The battle is very intense, with the combatants using all the weapons at their disposal. In particular, the young princes use the magic weapons that spit fire, thus setting some of the regiment's carts on fire. Then they shoot weapons that cause heavy rains. The regiment slowly begins

> to retreat, and finally one of the twins succeeds in wounding Lakshman. A messenger is sent report to the king that Lakshman has been wounded and that the two young men living with the sage have caught the horse. Now Rama places the crown on his head and leads his army into a battle against the two young men. Sita is full of apprehension because of the curse that can fall on the twins if they kill their father. Valmiki continues to meditate. Just before the battle begins Rama approaches the two men. 'Why don't you release the horse?' he asks. 'Because we don't want you to become invincible, since you abandoned your wife, who was faithful.' When the princes wish to continue the battle, Sita intervenes and reveals that King Rama is their father. The twins are glad. 'Then you are Sita,' they say to their mother. Rama wishes to embrace his sons but refrains from doing so because he first and foremost wants the approval of his people. The ministers give him their permission to accept Sita. 'Now the Ramayana is completed', Valmiki says. Rama responds, 'You wrote this epic to change the minds of the people. I am very thankful.' Sita declares: 'Your words were right. Today my disgrace is washed away. I wish to die at your feet.' She kneels down at Rama's feet. A severe thunderstorm breaks, accompanied by flashes of lightning, and the earth gradually splits open. While Sita is singing, 'Today I am going into the womb of the earth. Send me off happily. Forgive me for all my mistakes. Accept my prayer for the last time', she slowly disappears into the gap in the earth. Rama weeps, as do her two sons. Valmiki sings, accompanied by a choir: 'Sita, you are great. Till the time this great Himalaya is standing, till that time your name, Sita, cannot be wiped from this earth.'

In this film Rama's kingship is clearly pictured as a democratic monarchy. The well-being of his people is more important than his own. Ram Rajya's message is, however, that the people can be wrong and that it is the task of the ruler to give more weight to justice than simply to democracy. What is said to be the magnificence of the lineage of King Rama, i.e. that the well-being of his people is more important than the king's own, eventually turns out to have an adverse effect on his reputation, at least in the eyes of the earth, which mercifully took Sita into its womb to rescue her from the cruel world of her husband and his people.

Ram Rajya also recalls the shadow theatre plays of the past. Even the music calls to mind the music that accompanies those plays. This picture became a bigger box-office success than Bharat Milap and has 8 songs. Most of the shots are medium shots or medium close-ups. Close-ups are rare, but, when used, they portray someone who is full of emotion. Important close-ups are those of Rama the first time he sees Sita after having been separated from her for so long. The last close-up of the feature shows Rama after the earth has swallowed her up. There

are more close-ups of Rama than there are of Sita, which underscores the fact that Rama is the main character of the film.

The political context of the feature is also important of course. RAM RAJYA was released in 1943, during World War Two. The Indian Congress had agreed to help the British in their struggle for democracy against the Nazis and the fascists on the condition that India would be granted independence. The film is a clear appeal for democracy, but at the same time it warns against the danger of injustice, in particular with regard to women. So it can be regarded as a predecessor of the films of the 1990s that also tried to improve the position of women by exposing their bad situation (Virdi).

Sampoorna Ramayan

The next great Rama film was SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN, produced by Babubhai Mistri and released in 1961. Mistri belonged to the other important group among the filmmakers, the 'technicians coming from a wide range of social backgrounds' (Dwyer 2006a: 20). From 1933 till 1937 Mistri trained with Vijay Bhatt as a special effects director and then became a director and cameraman himself. It was, however, for his special effects that he remained most famous. Thus, it is no surprise that it was the dazzling effects that made his Rama feature popular as well as the use he made of Western music. Hanuman and his army of monkeys build the bridge to Langka while singing 'Everyone sing long live Rama' to a calypso tune (Dwyer 2006a: 44).

SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN is a colour film lasting 175 minutes. The actors Mahipal (1919–2005) and Anita Guha (1932–2007) play the roles of Rama and Sita respectively. Since the feature covers a much bigger part of the Ramayana epic, this time only a short survey will be presented followed by an analysis of the points that are accentuated in this feature.

> The picture starts with the *svayamvara* King Janak, the father of Princess Sita, organizes for his daughter. A *svayamvara* is a festival of sorts in which princes are invited to show off their abilities, so that the princess can choose the one she likes the most. King Janak makes it a condition that the prince who is able to span the bow of Shiva will be given his daughter's hand. Only Rama turns out to be able to handle the bow, even breaking it in the process. So he marries Sita. Together with Lakshman, who was also at the *svayamvara*, they return to Ayodhya where their father, King Dasharath, decides to abdicate and give the throne to his eldest son. Manthara, Kaikeyi's servant, becomes very angry because she wants Bharat, Kaikeyi's son, to become king. She is able to convince

Kaikeyi to force the king to change his mind in favour of Bharat and to send Rama into exile for 14 years. After a tearful scene, King Dasharath gives in. Rama leaves the same day, accompanied by Sita and Lakshman and after his departure King Dasharath dies. Bharat and his brother Shatrughan, who were elsewhere, return home and discover what has happened. Very angry with Manthara and with Kaikeyi, Bharat finds Rama, Sita and Lakshman, but Rama commands him to return home. Bharat returns with Rama's sandals, which he puts on the throne as a sign that Rama is the real king.

Rama, Sita and Lakshman live in the forest. A beautiful woman approaches Rama in order to seduce him and later Lakshman, but Lakshman shoots an arrow that wounds her in the nose. She turns out to be the demon Surpanakha and flees angrily to her brother, King Ravan of Langka. Ravan persuades another demon to change himself into a golden deer. When Sita sees the deer she wants to have it and begs Rama to catch it. Rama catches the animal, but it shouts for help in Rama's voice and Sita forces Lakshman to go help his brother. When Sita is alone, a Brahmin mendicant comes along and skilfully succeeds in having Sita leave the circle protecting her. He takes her by the hand and abducts her in a celestial vehicle. Sita jumps out of the vehicle while it is in the sky and is caught by the vulture Jatayu, who wants to help her. Ravan wounds the vulture fatally and brings Sita to a park close to his palace. Later Rama and Lakshman find the dying Jatayu and hear what happened to Sita. Then they meet the monkey king Sugriva and his monkey army with its general Hanuman. The monkeys promise to help him.

Hanuman finds Sita in the park near the palace of Langka and sees how Ravan threatens Sita. He gives her the ring Rama gave him and is then caught by Langka's soldiers. When Hanuman is brought to the audience hall, he provokes Ravan and his sons and is able to escape, but only just before the demons succeed in setting his tail on fire. Upon his return to Rama he flies low above Langka, setting fire to the palace and the houses of the city. Afterwards the monkeys build a bridge to Langka. There an intense battle is fought and Lakshman is seriously wounded. Hanuman, however, is able to get the necessary medicinal plant from the Himalayas. Lakshman recovers and the battle begins again. But Rama is unable to kill Ravan: for each of Ravan's heads he shoots off, a new one grows back. Then Vibhishana, Ravan's younger brother who sided with Rama, advises Rama to aim at Ravan's navel. He then wounds Ravan seriously. Rama commands Lakshman to go to Ravan quickly and to ask him to teach him, since Ravan was a great statesman. Ravan then instructs Lakshman and eventually dies after expressing his devotion to Rama.

In the next scene Sita is standing on a pile of wood. She has to undergo an ordeal. If she survives, the whole world will know that she had always been faithful to Rama. The fire god comes and stands next to her. Flowers descend from heaven and the fire god says to Rama that she is pure: 'Her touch sanctified even me today.' Rama takes Sita's hand and says:

> 'Sita' and the onlookers shout: 'Long live Ramachandra!' They return to Ayodhya, where Rama and Sita sit on the throne. Hanuman bids farewell, but before his departure he literally opens his chest to show that Rama and Sita are present there.
>
> The remainder of the story is generally the same as found in RAM RAJYA: the abandonment and exile of Sita who gives birth to two sons in Valmiki's hermitage, Lava and Kusha. They later recite the Ramayana before Rama and the *ashvameda* ritual is performed. The princes catch the horse and are able to wound Lakshman, subsequently discovering that Rama is their father. Eventually, after the army has given its consent, Rama is willing to accept and embrace Sita again, but she runs away, taking refuge with Vasundhara, the goddess of the earth, saying: 'Take me away, mother. Give me a place under your heart. Give me a place.' While Rama is shouting 'Sita, Sita', the earth opens up and takes her away. Then, 'as an emperor', Rama furiously commands the earth to return 'his' Sita to him. He immediately repents, falls to the ground and humbly prays for her return, but to no avail. In the last scene Rama, Lava and Kusha enter Ayodhya. While the last song is sung, the two princes, accompanied by their father, make a powder offering to Vasundhara.

The whole story of the Ramayana is covered in almost three hours. Only the narratives of Rama's youth are lacking. The feature has many characteristics that are part of classic Indian film: it has 12 songs and people dance at four different times, the last time Sita herself because she is very happy during her stay in the forest. Another time is when the monkeys move in a dance-like way while building the bridge to Langka and singing a rhythmic song at the same time. The camera serves the presentation of the narrative. Most shots are long shots, medium shots and medium close-ups. Close-ups are rare, but those of Sita are frontal and those of Rama en face.

Ravan's disclosure just before he dies that he is a devotee of Rama must be an element drawn from the 14th-century Bengal Ramapañcali by Krittivasa (Bose: 107–108, 119; Nagar and Nagar: xv–xvi), since it is absent from the previous Ramayana versions, including those by Valmiki and Tulsidas. So, it is clear that, in addition to the versions composed by Valmiki and Tulsidas, Mistri also used Krittivasa as a source for his film.

One of the most remarkable things in this film is the portrayal of Ravan. He is Rama's greatest adversary and can be evil, as when he threatens Sita, but at the same time he has also some good qualities. For instance, he is a good statesman, whose wise lessons can help Lakshman. And just before he breathes his last, he turns out to be a devotee

of Rama. Ravan is also called Dashamukha, which means ten faces or ten heads. When Ravan is considering what to do—either to fight or to return Sita to Rama—in the last night before the decisive battle, the film reveals how it interprets these ten heads. Each head represents a moral, psychological or spiritual quality; four of them are good (insight, intelligence, caution and mercy) and five are evil (arrogance, lust, greed, desire and anger). They talk to him in turns during that night—first a good head, then an evil one. Eventually, one head is left, his normal head, which ultimately decides to fight. This image clearly reveals that Ravan was not only evil.

As may already be clear from the overview above, something similar can be said about Rama as well. In general, Rama is good and wise, but his abandonment of his consort reflects badly on him. It gives the impression that not only are the people of Ayodhya heartless but Rama himself is as well. It is Sita's love that gives substance to their relationship. During her exile Sita suffers intensely and at the end of the picture her patience is exhausted. She asks the earth to open up so that she can escape her misery. Thus the picture gives a strong critique of an excessive form of patriarchalism expressed in the behaviour of the laundryman and subsequently supported by King Rama.

Special effects, such as the nine heads speaking to Ravan, the continuous return of a new head after one has been shot off by Rama and the faces of Rama and Sita in the chest of Hanuman earned the film high praise.

Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan

On 25 January 1987 a new program premiered on India's government-run television network, *Doordarshan*, broadcast on Sunday mornings at 9:30 a.m. until 31 July 1988. The series was originally comprised of 52 episodes of 45 minutes, but due to popular demand it had be extended three times into a story of 78 episodes. But even then the series was continued after an interval of several months by a retelling of the Uttarakanda about Sita's exile (Lutgendorf 1990: 127–128). This latter series was released separately later on DVD in a series called LUV KUSH. It is significant that even afterwards this part was not included in the RAMAYAN. Sagar obviously felt great opposition to including this part in his great RAMAYAN series. The tradition concerning the Ramayana shows that he had good reason to do so, since there are various ancient versions including the 9th-century Javanese Ramayana

Kakawin (Zoetmulder: 226, 230–231; Santoso: 706–727), which also end with the coronation of Rama and Sita after their return from exile. It is widely accepted in academic circles that the Uttarakanda, just like large sections of the Balakanda, the first book of the Ramayana, was added to Valmiki's version only later (Whaling: 15). Tulsidas concludes his Ramcaritmanas with a seventh book that he does call Uttarakanda but replaces the original content of this section with a dialogue between the celestial bird Garuda and the crow Bhushundi, nothing of which is found in previous editions of the epic (R.C. Prasad: xvii; 571–664). For the rest, Tulsidas relates only the birth of Lava and Kusha; he says nothing about Sita being exiled again (R.C. Prasad: 571–664). This episode is narrated in the Lava Kushakanda, a text which, as poetry, is inferior to the Manas itself. According to R.C. Prasad, it must be regarded as an elaborate interpolation from a later time (R.C. Prasad: 705, note 1).[10] Since Ramanand Sagar omitted the Lava Kushakanda from his Ramayan film, the portrayal of Rama in Luv Kush would play only a marginal role in the representation of Sagar's views on Rama.

Ramanand Sagar was born as Ramchand Chopra in Lahore, a city currently located in Pakistan but at that time still part of British India. His family name reveals that they were of *kshatriya* background.[11] According to Hindu tradition, the *kshatriya*s are administrators and military men, thus comparable to the nobility of the European Middle Ages. They rank second after the Brahmans. Sagar was a journalist and a writer for a time, publishing various stories under the pseudonyms of Ramanand Chopra and Ramanand Bedi, and obtained a degree in Sanskrit. After the Partition of 1947 he fled to Mumbai and wrote a number of scripts and dialogues for the Hindi films produced by S.S. Vasan. In 1953 he founded his own film company *Sagar Art* (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen: 202). In the 1970s lack of income forced him to turn to television. He produced a miniseries called Dada-didi ki Kahaniyan (Grandpa's and Grandma's Stories). He then approached the *Doordarshan* officials with a proposal for an extended serialization of the Ramayana. He claimed that he was a lifelong devotee of the Ram-

[10] R.C. Prasad says nothing about the author of this interpolation. Given the poorer quality of the poetry, it is possible that it was not written by Tulsidas.

[11] Personal communication by Eekta Trienekens, 10 January 2008. He later used the name of Ramanand Sagar, which he received from his maternal grandmother when she adopted him after her children had left her home (Website *Sagar Arts*), thus omitting the name of Chopra. It is possible that Sagar attempted to improve his religious authority among orthodox Hindus in this way by concealing the fact that he was not a Brahman.

caritmanas and that he was involved in a group that had been meeting already for 25 years to recite and discuss the text. When his idea was vetoed, he revised the proposal and resubmitted it. Its approval was apparently delayed by concern that broadcasting such a serial would provoke communalist feelings. Even after it was approved, the *Doordarshan* officials remained fearful of irregularities, since the series was assigned to a time slot during which it was expected that there would be few viewers (Lutgendorf 1990: 134).

The roles of Rama and Sita were given to Arun Govil and Dipika Chikhlia respectively. The hamlet of Umbergaon on the coast in what was almost the most southern part of the state of Gujarat was selected to buildVrindavan Studios. The buildings included living quarters and soundstages for indoor locations and easy access to surrounding fields, beaches, and stretches of jungle for outdoor shooting. The entire crew of 300 individuals lived at the site for two weeks each month for the duration of the project (Lutgendorf 1990: 127, 134–135). It is important to realize that the studio and its surroundings were located in or near the region where Rama, Sita and Lakshman roamed during their exile. The serial was shot, therefore, in sacred surroundings.

Ramananda Sagar mentions five versions of the Ramayana as his sources: Valmiki's Sanskrit version, Kampan's 12th-century Tamil Iramavataram (Hart and Heifetz: 2), the 13th-century Telugu Ranganatha Ramayana (Sitapati: 14–15), Krittivasa's Bengal Ramapañcali and Tulsidas' Ramcaritmanas.[12] Sagar claims to have related nothing that was not found in these texts (RAMAYAN: DVD 14). Nonetheless, it seems that Tulsidas' and Valmiki's versions were his most important sources. Many verses from Tulsidas' Manas return in the film, as well as a few from Valmiki's version (Pauwels; Lutgendorf 1990: 169). The influence of Kampan's Iramavataram is recognizable in the portrayal of Ravan and his kingdom. Ravan appears here as a magnificent Dravidian monarch, whereas the architecture and iconography of his court project an unmistakably Tamil Shaiva atmosphere (Lutgendorf 1990: 155). The influence of Krittivasa's Ramapañcali is visible in Ravan mumbling repeatedly 'Shri Ram, Shri Ram', when he dies on the battlefield, thus revealing that deep in his heart he also was a devotee of Ram.[13]

[12] Ramananda Sagar uses the popular titles of these texts to refer to them; the titles are Kambaramayan, Shri Ranganath Ramayan and Krutivas Ramayan respectively.

[13] Krittivasa's Ramapañcali elaborates on Ravan's attitude by recounting that Ravan bows before Rama on the battlefield before he engaged in combat (Nagar and Nagar: xvi).

Nonetheless, the picture also contains many scenes these texts do not include.[14]

It is, of course, impossible to summarize Sagar's RAMAYAN. Its total length on the 16 DVDs comprising the whole picture is 43 hours and 18 minutes (2607 minutes). Therefore, a short characterization of the film will be presented.

The story begins with Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi floating on Vishnu's serpent couch in the milky ocean. Brahma comes along, accompanied by the other deities, to summon Vishnu to intervene because the demon Ravan has become drunk with arrogance because Brahma and Shiva promised to make him and the other demons extremely powerful. They were disturbing the rituals and sacrifices of pious people and becoming a threat to *dharma* (justice)[15] all over the world. After this introduction the story of the Ramayana begins. The court priest of King Dasharath makes a sacrifice to guarantee that the Sun Dynasty will not come to an end because its sole descendant, King Dasharath, still has no son. In the course of the story, the history of Rama's ancestral kings is shown, including their heroic actions. As already stated above, the part about the exile of Sita in Valmiki's ashram is omitted.

Although Sagar claimed that he related nothing that was not included in the epic texts mentioned earlier, the American scholar and expert in the Indian Ramayana tradition, Philip Lutgendorf and the Belgian indologist and film expert Heidi R.M. Pauwels mention more than one episode that, in their opinion, is new. Lutgendorf points to two units relating events that took place when Rama and his brothers were young, the most important of which is the episode that shows the education the four brothers receive in Vashishtha's hermitage. This unit includes nice stories about Rama singing a lullaby to comfort his brothers, but it also shows how fond Shiva is of Rama. Other new episodes or newly presented episodes are the meeting between King Janak and King Dasharath, both of whom claim to be each other's servant, thus giving the message that they are, in fact, equal (Lutgendorf

[14] See, for example, Pauwels and Lutgendorf 1990: 148–149, 153–154. The present author discovered more scenes not included in Tulsidas' version.

[15] The present author translates *dharma* by justice, but it needs to be realized that in Hinduism the implementation of justice can be very different from its implementation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For the great majority of Hindus, *dharma* includes a form of the caste system. Sagar's serial is in line with this view of justice.

1990: 148–150). Pauwels also mentions some new episodes, the most important of them being the scene in which Rama declares that in his view Sita is not his slave but his equal and then promises not to take any other queen in the future (Pauwels: 165, 199–200). Furthermore, Sagar made some modifications concerning Kaikeyi, the junior queen, who demanded the throne for her son Bharat at Rama's expense, which also include some new episodes. When Kaikeyi asks Bharat for permission to accompany him on his journey to Rama to request him to return to Ayodhya, he coldly refuses her request. She weeps piteously, at which point Kaushalya intervenes and Bharat gives in. The sequence ends with the image of Kaushalya and Kaikeyi weeping in each other's arms. In Chitrakut, the place where Rama, Sita and Lakshman spend their exile, Kaikeyi publicly offers to withdraw her boons, but Rama answers that only the king can take or give back boons. Kaikeyi later visits Ram privately in his hut and asks him personally to return (see also Lutgendorf 1990: 153).

After their return to Ayodhya, Bharat decides to live in a hermitage as well, where he is visited after some time by Mandevi, his wife, who is suffering because of his decision to live as an ascetic. Mandevi wishes to be near him so that she can serve him, just like Sita serves Rama, but Bharat sends her back to help Kaushalya. Bharat's mother Kaikeyi visits him later and asks him to permit her to stay with him in the ashram, but he refuses by saying: 'Queen Kaikeyi killed my mother.' He commands her to go back to the palace. Kaikeyi collapses in her palanquin and returns to the palace. The audience sees her wandering through the empty corridors of the palace, alternately weeping and laughing as if she has become insane (see also Lutgendorf 1990: 154).

What is new as well are the shots of the situation in Ayodhya while the story of Rama and Sita continues. Kaushalya is mourning and in the meantime becoming increasingly greyer. Later, when Rama is in great danger, she declares to Bharat that she senses that her son is in great distress. Lakshman's wife Urmila longs intensely for her husband and looks worriedly at the lamps she burns for him. At the same time Lakshman is fatally wounded and unconscious, but Urmila has no knowledge of this (see also Lutgendorf 1990: 155–156).

The monkeys and the demons are more human than in previous versions of the Ramayana: they act, feel and think like human beings. Moreover, their wives are human as well; only the male apes look like monkeys. Furthermore, the scenes in which the apes climb and swing

in trees like Hanuman did in LANKA DAHAN are scarce. The demons also act, feel and think like human beings—in fact, the picture is full of very noble demons. The last meeting between Ravan's son Indrajit and his wife Sulochana is more moving and displays deeper love than the scenes showing the love between Rama and Sita. The mutual love between these two demons contrasts greatly with Rama's behaviour when he meets Sita for the first time after his victory over Ravan. Rama refuses to accept Sita before she undergoes a fire ordeal to prove that she did not commit adultery during her stay in Lanka. Sagar attempts to diminish the opposition to Rama's behaviour by an explanation already given in the Ramcaritmanas: the fire ordeal is only a method for getting Sita back from the fire god who had protected her after Rama had given her to him before leaving to catch the golden deer. What happened to her afterwards happened only, in fact, to her shadow.[16]

Another unit displaying the humanity of the demons is the consideration of Vibhishan, Ravan's youngest brother, who is kicked by his eldest brother and expelled from the kingdom of Lanka. He eventually comes to the conviction that he must join Rama to ensure the safety of the people of Lanka after Ravan's fall. According to Lutgendorf, such a concern for the population of the country is a modern one. Other examples of the humanization of the demons are the demon guard Trijata's empathic care for Sita and the depiction of Ravan with only one head (Lutgendorf 1990: 156–157).

Despite Sagar's additions to his version of Ramayana rendition, Lutgendorf believes that Sagar was right to claim that he did not add anything, because Sagar 'exploited his medium and created innovative interpretations within the limits of traditional themes' (Lutgendorf 1990: 157).

Ramanand Sagar also omitted many events, which raised questions among the serial's viewers concerning some of these admissions. They asked, for example, why he omitted the self-immolation of Sulochana, Indrajit's consort, when Indrajit's dead body was burned. Sagar defended this decision by observing that we must not lose sight of the social circumstances. Moreover, the event is not mentioned in the versions by Valmiki, Kampan and Tulsidas. He believed that it was inserted only

[16] Ramcaritmanas 6,111,6–8 (R.C. Prasad: 559–560). Nonetheless, Sagar considered it necessary to explain this explicitly after the scene (RAMAYAN, DVD 16). Tulsidas probably got this idea from an earlier version of the Ramayana, the 15th-century Adhyatma Ramayana (Whaling: 112–113, 126, 138, 250).

later (RAMAYAN, DVD 16), but perhaps it was more important for Sagar not to become known as an advocate of the burning of widows.

All this takes place within the framework of the classical Indian mythologicals, since the whole story is narrated and presented, alternated with songs and dances displaying the feelings of the people projected on the screen. The dances in the audience hall of the king of Lanka, for example, also underscore the magnificence of Ravan's kingship.

Sagar's RAMAYAN includes a number of new scenes, a great many new elaborations and many new interpretations. But it also omits a number of events related by other authors. Hence Lutgendorf rightly claims that Sagar made a new enthralling version of the ancient epic, comparable to Valmiki's version of the Ramayana and Tulsidas' Ramcaritmanas (Lutgendorf 1990: 170). Perhaps Sagar's RAMAYAN can also be defined as a cinematic *purana*, comparable to the Bhagavata Purana, a large work that narrates the vicissitudes of Krishna. A *purana* is an encyclopaedic work that also narrates the legends of the history of humankind before the hero of the book is born. Large parts of Sagar's serial are devoted to the acts of Rama's ancestors. What is missing, however, is the end of Rama's life. A *purana* would relate that as well.

Philip Lutgendorf pays a great deal of attention to the lack of understanding among the Indian film critics in the English language press of India. They criticize the 'agonizing slow advance of the narrative' and the poor quality of the production (Lutgendorf 1990: 141, 163–164), while at the same time many of them were astonished at its enormous success. Lutgendorf explains that the RAMAYAN does not belong to the tradition of Western film but to that of the Hindu *katha*. A *katha* is a ritual that includes the recitation, narration and explanation of holy texts. It is an ancient tradition in India to organize *katha*s, to which many people were often invited. In particular, the Ramayana and Ramcaritmanas were part and parcel of this tradition (Lutgendorf 1991), although there are also *katha*s on parts of other Hindu scriptures such as the Bhagavata Purana. People who turn out to be great narrators at *katha*s were even asked to perform on radio. Tapes and even videotapes of *katha*s are sold all over the country (Lutgendorf 1991: 432–433).

The context of Sagar's serial is obviously religious. The religious character of the film and its screening was, moreover, reinforced by Sagar's giving up alcohol and tobacco and instituting a vegetarian regime for the film crew. In this way he tried to accede to the audience's standards for epic performers. The garments of the protagonists and the appearance of the monkeys was not natural but followed the long-established

conventions of the mythologicals (Lutgendorf 1990: 144) set by Phalke. The critics were very critical of the poor quality of the special effects, including the pulsating, garishly tinted divine weapons. Cost-cutting was a factor, but Sagar must have realized that special effects were not crucial to maintaining the attention of the spectators. According to Lutgendorf, the emphasis was on 'seeing' its characters. To most viewers, the RAMAYAN was a feast of *darshan* (Lutgendorf 1990: 145), the act in which it is not only that the worshipper sees the deity but the deity sees the worshipper as well. This also occurs when a believer sees a divine image or a holy man or woman (Eck: 3–7). The German indologist Vasudha Dalmia-Lüderitz gives an interesting twist in her interpretation of the serial. She argues that one of the most important ways by which the serial further develops the Ramayana narrative is through its presentation of the close-ups. These close-ups give a proximity that continues, on one level, to be *darshan* but, on another, approximates most closely the studio portraits of family members (Dalmia-Lüderitz: 223), which only reinforces the viewers' feeling that they are in the presence of the divine.

The message of Ramanand Sagar's serial was not only religious; it was political as well. Lutgendorf asserts that during the education of Rama and his brothers in Vashishtha's ashram the contents of the sage's teachings are revealing: a blend of yoga and the Hindu Vedanta philosophy (illustrated by *cakra* graphics and out-of-the-body special effects), Gandhian nationalism and an idealized Vedic socialism (Lutgendorf 1990: 148). Pauwels demonstrates that Sagar also promotes a rather conservative view of the relationship between male and female: Rama considers Sita to be his equal, but only if she keeps him on the right path, whereas he declares this to be so only after Sita has asked to be commanded. In other words, only women who are prepared to be subordinate are promised marital fidelity and considered to be equal (Pauwels: 199–201). Sagar managed to touch upon a range of topics dear to middle-class sensibility: the importance of wholesome education and the idealized work ethic, the lost glory of the imagined Vedic past in which *rishis* (sages) presided over model academies and preached nationalism, egalitarian democracy, an indigenous discipline of 'scientific' mysticism (Lutgendorf 1990: 149), and a conservative attitude promoting obedience to parental authority as well as monogamy and equality for woman—but only if they accepted their husbands' authority. Furthermore, King Dasharath states time and again that his daughter-in-laws will be treated as if they are his own daughters. The

senior queen Kaushalya promises that their lives will be happier than in the palace of their parents (RAMAYAN, DVD 3). In other words, the exploitation of daughters-in-law that is so frequent in India is wrong. It is clear that in this film Sagar attempted to present a type of Hinduism that, in many respects, is conservative and patriarchal but also suited to modern society.

The reaction of the Indian spectators was tremendous. When the serial was being broadcast, Sunday morning became a special and, for many viewers, a 'sacred' time. Multitudes gathered in front of televisions so that they would not miss anything of the saga about Rama and his family. Bazaars, streets and wholesale markets became so deserted that they appeared to be under curfew. There was a decline of traffic and trains were delayed, because the passengers did not want to leave the platforms before the broadcast was over. In many homes watching RAMAYAN became a religious ritual. The television set was garlanded, decorated with sandalwood paste and vermillion, and conch shells were blown. Grandparents admonished their grandchildren to bathe before the broadcast started, and housewives put off serving meals so that the family was purified and had fasted before they started to watch the epic on television. There were even ritualized public viewings, where crowds watched display sets (Lutgendorf 1990: 136–137). Another effect was that the dates of certain religious festivals were moved. The slaying of Ravan on television caused an out-of-season *Dashara* festival (Lutgendorf 1990: 140–141). There were political effects as well: Arun Govil and Dara Singh (who played Hanuman) were asked to make public appearances in support of Congress (I) candidates in the parliamentary by-elections of June 1988. Non-political promotion tours also caused much upheaval. In August 1987 thousands of spectators swarmed the banks of the Ganges in Benares to catch a glimpse of Rama, Sita and Lakshman who passed down the river on a barge. This also happened at Jaipur airport (Lutgendorf 1990: 137–138; Mishra: 220–221). There was even a strike in Punjab by sanitation labourers who belonged to a low caste calling themselves *Balmikis*, for an extension of the serial, so that it would include Sita's exile and the education that Valmiki, whom they claimed as anscestor, gave to Rama's sons (Lutgendorf 1990: 139–140). A tragic effect was the attack by some Sikh terrorists on audiences watching TV in Kurukshetra, Haryana on 19 June 1988 in which 15 people were killed and 30 others wounded. It was, in fact, a very strange act, since many Sikhs, Muslims and Christians also watched the serial with great pleasure (Lutgendorf 1990: 138). The television

serial later became an overwhelming success among the Indian communities outside the subcontinent as well (Lutgendorf 1990: 138; Bakker 1999: 170–171; Mishra: 219).

1.4. *Analysis*

Although there is much similarity between the Rama films discussed in the previous section, there are also some remarkable differences, which lead to a certain variety in the portrayals of Rama in these pictures. But it seems that there is less variety compared to the depictions and characterizations of Jesus. This section will look at this variety in order to explore its consequences for the depiction of Rama since 1917.

All motion pictures that have been reviewed in section 1 are mythologicals. The films of this genre largely follow the narration mode David Bordwell called classical narration. This mode has character-centred causality, unity of time and space and an omnipresent and omniscient narrator. The film focuses mainly on the cognitive perception of the spectators (Bordwell: 164). In addition, however, the motion pictures also try to appeal to the viewers' emotions: this is even one of the characteristics of Indian literature and drama—the attempt to evoke emotion. The Indian writers follow the so-called *rasa* doctrine, which is focused on carrying away the hearts and minds of the readers and spectators so that they forget their own emotions completely and let themselves be filled by those of the protagonists. In this way they enter the world of the divine (Kulkarni: 28–33). In other words, the authors attempt to have the readers and audience identify with what their characters are going through. This is probably the reason why Westerners have the impression that India actors so frequently overact and that Indian films are often so melodramatic.

This is reinforced in the so-called *bhakti* literature. *Bhakti* means devotion and is, in the so-called *bhakti* form of Hinduism, the key emotion with which one has to approach God (Klostermaier: 188–189). Tulsidas' Manas is a perfect example of this type of literature. Its intention is obviously to evoke *bhakti* among its readers as well as listeners when it is read during a *katha* or other meeting where it is read aloud (R.C. Prasad: xvi–xvii). The producers of mythologicals tie in with this tradition and also try to evoke *bhakti* in the hearts and minds of the audience. This is a second reason why many mythologicals are considerably melodramatic. Rachel Dwyer comments:

> Another great pleasure of the mythological film is closely allied to that of the Indian film's melodramatic mode, namely that we are in a moral universe, where the world is ultimately a safe place, righteousness rewarded and wickedness punished. One can enjoy the pleasures of the cinema, and the mythological in particular, without giving up—indeed by reinforcing—orthodox moral principles such as devotion to gods, respect for elders, love for your country, a wife's devotion to her husband. (Dwyer 2006a: 58)

Although all Ramayana films belong to the same genre and follow the mode of classic narration, some development is visible in their portrayal of Rama.

The first film reviewed in the present chapter, LANKA DAHAN produced in 1917, presented a Rama who, full of satisfaction, saw—though invisible to his wife Sita—how happy she was when she received his ring from Hanuman. The short section of the film that is available gives the impression that Rama is apparently an omnipresent god who still takes care of his wife even though he is far away.

The title of the second Rama film is BHARAT MILAP, i.e. Bharat's Meeting. The film's emphasis is therefore on Bharat's meetings with Rama. They embrace twice, thus expressing their mutual love and willingness to accede to the other. However, there is one thing that prevents Rama from giving in to Bharat and ascending the throne before the fourteen years of exile have passed—the promise his father made to Kaikeyi. Nonetheless, love dominates the picture, and this love is also able to overcome Kaikeyi's hatred so that she can return to the circle of Dasharath's consorts. For the people around Rama this love is *bhakti*, devotion to the person they all adore, Rama. For Rama it is different: Rama's love is full of wisdom, constantly doing what is just and preventing what needs to be prevented. It is right that he keeps his father's promise. He even enjoys it, since he is not attached to the wealth and luxury of royal life. His main role in this picture, however, is to calm and comfort everyone constantly, helping them see things from the right perspective, i.e. that of the *dharma*, of the cosmic order and justice. The people around him are able to follow him and to overcome their feelings—which tend to lead them astray—if they continue in their loyalty and devotion to Rama.

The following two quotations from Rachel Dwyer's book, *Filming the Gods*, give a beautiful characterization of the content and message of this feature:

> The picture depicts how Shree Ramchandra[17] in the idol of Ayodhya and the beloved son of Raja Dasaratha, declining the offer of sovereignty willingly embraced banishment in the wilds for fourteen long years to honour his father's words to one of the junior queens. It shows also how Ramchandra's brother Bharat refuses the gift of throne out of his love and respect for Ramchandra and the traditions of the royal house of Raghu. The picture depicts also the graceful and gracious Seeta suffering ungrudgingly with her lord as a dutiful Hindu woman who finds joy in the pleasures of her husband, grief in his sorrows and unbounded sympathy in his predicaments, thus proving that for her, there is none greater than her lord. (Dwyer 2006a: 36)

> This is not a film with many miracles nor with swashbuckling heroism, but it is about the brothers' love for each other and the virtues of patience, endurance, forgiveness and loyalty. The emotion is very well handled and the image of gentle, righteous Rama is projected, rather than the angry warrior we have seen in recent years. (Dwyer 2006a: 35)

In Ram Rajya, Vijay Bhatt's second film, Rama's kingship is clearly portrayed as a democratic monarchy. That the well-being of his people is more important than his own is the message even his ancestor kings convey in one of the three sequences with a magical character. The other two scenes with a magical character are part of the battle between Lakshman and his two nephews and the earth swallowing Sita. The message of the ancestral kings reveals that not only Rama's kingship but also that of his entire lineage was democratic. In this way the feature claims, in fact, that the ancient tradition of India always supported democracy. *Ramrajya* is a democracy, and in the past India was accustomed to this political system. The image of Rama is not that of an absolute king but of a democratic ruler. At the same time, the picture gives voice to some criticism. Valmiki finds peace when the sons of Rama prove willing to prevent Rama from becoming invincible, because his democratic rule adversely affects the rights of women, even those who were faithful to their husbands throughout their whole lives. The word 'abandon' is a translation of the Hindi word *tyag*, the same word that is used for divorce. Divorce is a sin in the Hindu religion; it may restore Rama's reputation as a king but his wife is innocent. The unbelief of the people concerning Sita's honesty is also a sin, which needed to be countered by a righteous king. It seems, however, as if Rama is so paralyzed by his position as king that he does not stand up for the rights of women

[17] Another name for Rama.

when the people are inclined to forget them. Rama fights for the rights of everyone except for those of his own wife. The feature's message is that the people can be wrong and that it is the task of the ruler to give more weight to justice than simply to democracy. What is said to be the magnificence of the lineage of King Rama, i.e. that the well-being of his people is more important than the king's own, eventually turns out to be to his disadvantage, at least in the eyes of the earth, which mercifully took Sita into its womb to rescue her from the cruel world of her husband and his people.

In 1960 Mistri's SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN premiered. One of the most eye-catching things of this feature was its portrayal of Ravan. The film clearly reveals that Ravan was not only evil. Something similar, however, can be said about Rama as well. In general, Rama is good and wise; when he speaks, his words are full of wisdom. If everyone would put what he says into practice, then a great deal of trouble would be avoided. Rama is also very pious. He is meticulous in everything he does to ensure that the necessary rituals are performed. He is the only participant in the *svayamvara* for Sita who prays before he fetches the bow. He approaches other people with respect, performing an *añjali* (solemn salutation) when he meets them. Furthermore, he always raises up the people who kneel before him. He is also forgiving. Ravan can be forgiven right up to the last minute. Rama is very modest, always prepared to please others by giving way to a certain extent. Yet it is this quality that becomes his weakness in the second part of the motion picture, when he abandons Sita to oblige his people even though the queen is innocent. Just as in RAM RAJYA, the Hindi word *tyag* (divorce) is used here. Whereas Rama's royal authority is the basis in RAM RAJYA for commanding Lakshman to bring Sita to the hermitage, in this picture Lakshman has to do it out of loyalty to his brother. In both cases, however, Lakshman obeys only when commanded.

Rama's abandonment of his consort casts a slur on his reputation. Although it is repeated time and again that the people of Ayodhya, the ones primarily responsible for the queen's abandonment, are heartless, it is also repeated that Rama himself is heartless as well. At the end of the film Rama commands the goddess Vasundhara 'as an emperor', only to repent and fall to the ground in humble prayer later. Ultimately, it is not Rama who returns Sita's dignity to her but Vasundhara.

Rama is one of the *avatara*s (incarnations) of the god Vishnu. He is the Lord of the universe. He is clearly more powerful than the god Brahma. The goodness of his character is superior to that of his brothers.

He is invincible and righteous, but he is harsh towards his wife. It is Sita's love that gives substance to their relationship, although it is quite visible that Rama loves her. But there is—certainly in Western eyes—a great distance between them. Only once does Sita lay her head on Rama's chest, i.e. at the moment that she decides to accompany him into exile. In this respect, SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN hardly differs from Vijay Bhatt's Rama films. The reason, of course, lies in the rules governing Indian film. They prohibit the presentation of scenes belonging to private life. This also explains why the close-ups of Sita are frontal: if the audience sees a character from the front, the context is not that of private but of public life, since it recalls the frontal orientation of the theatre where the spectators also see the players from the front on the stage (M.M. Prasad: 76–78). Therefore, the distance between Rama and Sita does not lead necessarily to the conclusion that Rama does not love Sita. Rama's refusal of the advances of the beautiful demon Shurpanakha does show that, while sexual attractiveness does not affect him, the love of Sita does move him. His love and that of Sita become most obvious in the scenes showing their suffering because of their intense longing for each other in situations in which they are separated from each other, such as when Sita is being kept prisoner in Lanka or, later, when she is in exile in Valmiki's hermitage. The feature stresses time and again how both of them suffer from the other's absence. This is characteristic of Indian culture: when the other is absent, love becomes most intense, a feeling often expressed in the song accompanying the sequence (Bakker 2007a: 178). Just as in other films on the Ramayana, Sita suffers intensely during her exile in Valmiki's hermitage and at the end of the picture her patience is exhausted. Whereas in RAM RAJYA the earth opens up on its own, as if it sees Sita's misery, in SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN it does so at her explicit request. She can no longer endure Rama's obliging attitude towards his people, since it affects justice and makes life unbearable for her. Thus the picture provides a strong critique of an excessive form of patriarchalism expressed in the behaviour of the laundryman.

The big difference from the previous Rama films discussed in the present study is the delineation of Rama's opponent Ravan. The latter is no longer only wicked. In addition to arrogance, lust, greed, desire and anger, he also possesses insight, intelligence, caution and mercy. Furthermore, he is a good statesman, whose wise lessons can help Lakshman. And just before he breathes his last, he turns out to be a devotee

of Rama. In other words, the strong contrast between Rama and his opponents reflecting the opposition between good and evil is modified. There is evil on both sides and there is goodness on both sides. The difference is that Rama's goodness is superior to Ravan's and Ravan's wickedness is deeper than Rama's shortcomings. Nonetheless, a trend is started that will be reinforced in Ramanand Sagar's Rama serial.

In Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN Rama is portrayed as someone who is very considerate towards his brothers, father, his father's consorts, including Kaikeyi who drove him into exile, and—before her abduction by Ravan—also towards Sita. During his education in Vashishtha's hermitage Rama also shows himself to be very inquisitive, asking time and again for extra explanations. He is calm, modest and sympathetic and says many wise things. Furthermore, he is constantly consulting his father, father-in-law and the sages, taking note of their advice. In other words, Rama is the perfect protagonist for an interpretation of the *dharma* that is full of respect for the authority of sages and parents. Pauwels even asserts that, in contrast to Tulsidas' Manas, Sagar's portrayal of Rama privileges *dharma* over *bhakti* (devotion). As a result,

> Rama becomes more and more remote, less a likely object for bhakti. He becomes so "sanitized," so disciplined and detached in everything he does, that there are hardly any emotions left to endear him to us.… The irony is that the main choice of Sagar's bhakti, namely Rama, has become devoid of emotion himself. (Pauwels: 202)

This may be applicable to the episode of Rama's falling in love and his marriage. After Sita's abduction, Rama can become very depressed, as when he is in Kishkinda, the kingdom of the monkeys, and hears nothing about Sita, while the monkey king Sugriva seems to forget his trouble. Rama also loses courage when Lakshman is fatally wounded by Indrajit's heavy blows. He has to be consoled and encouraged by his ally, Vibhishan, Ravan's younger brother.

A special moment occurs when Indrajit's magical weapons render Rama and Lakshman unconscious. Then it is Hanuman's intervention that saves them. He has Garuda, the celestial bird, release the princes from the spell of Indrajit's weapons. At that moment Rama is completely helpless.

Thus, Rama is a great individual. He is eager to follow the *dharma* and is vigorous, wise and merciful. All Ravan needs to do for all attacks on Lanka to stop immediately is to return Sita to Rama. Yet Rama is sometimes filled by a peculiar harshness, such as when he demands

that Sita undergo an ordeal. Furthermore, he can lose his confidence and courage and at one point he is even completely defenceless. It is striking that at these times Hanuman turns out to be the one who takes the initiatives that save his lord. Hence, the conclusion is justified that, if the emergency becomes paramount, Hanuman shows that he is stronger than Rama. In the Manas it is not the monkey but the seer Narada who warns Garuda (R.C. Prasad: 532). In Sagar's serial Hanuman's role has become more prominent.

Ramanand Sagar felt that the episodes in which Rama and Lakshman are unconscious and helpless could be distressing for the viewer. Hence, he stated—truthfully—that he took them from the versions by Valmiki and Tulsidas (RAMAYAN, DVD 14; cf. Sen: 216–217; R.C. Prasad: 531–532).[18] Nonetheless, they are absent from Mistri's SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN. As already stated above, Sagar explains Rama's harsh attitude to Sita by the fact that the ordeal was necessary to get Sita back from the fire god.

Sagar ends his Ramayan with following message about Rama:

> What is most significant in the Ramayana is that it portrays Shri Ram in the image of an ideal man. It thus shows mankind the path of moral upliftment. We have seen for ourselves how Ram's saga has left its imprint on people of all races and stamped on their hearts humanism's eternal values. Ram's saga has awakened people to their own *dharma*. That is, it makes all people conscious of their duty and ideals. This great epic transcends all barriers of caste and creed, traditions and nations and touches the heart of humanity. That's why it has guided mankind over the ages. It has continued to teach man his *dharma*. *Dharma* means duty. We speak of what a father's *dharma* ought to be or a daughter's *dharma* on occasion. The Ramayan has always shown us our path of duty. That's why it is recited and heard, again and again. This sacred epic does not belong

[18] In Valmiki's version Indrajit's magical weapons render Vibhishan, Rama and Lakshman unconscious. Vibhishan wakes up first, since, as a demon, he is less susceptible to the impact of magic. He sends Hanuman to the Himalayas to get the medicinal plants to cure all the victims, including Rama and Lakshman. In Tulsidas' version this event is split into two, one in which only Lakshman is rendered unsconscious and another in which both Rama and Lakshman are unconscious. The first time Hanuman is sent to the Himalayas to get medicinal plants, while the second time they are cured by Garuda who is warned by the sage Narada. Sagar follows Tulsidas' version but reverses the order of the events by putting the first event after the second one. Thus, at first both Rama and Lakshman are unconscious and later only Lakshman. Furthermore, it is Hanuman who warns Garuda, who subsequently has to be convinced by Narada to act (Sen: 214–222; R.C. Prasad: 519–524, 531–532; RAMAYAN, DVD 14 and 15).

> to any one country and has now proved that it belongs to all mankind. (RAMAYAN, DVD 16)

Thus Rama is a great character, divine since he is a superior incarnation of Vishnu. He is eager to follow the *dharma*, vigorous, wise and merciful. Sometimes, however, Rama can be very harsh. At the same time, Sagar explains, Rama is the image of an ideal human being, pointing to the way to moral edification by showing people their own *dharma*, their own path of duty. In other words, Rama is a very friendly and sympathetic man eager to do good for others. But at the same time he is a staunch defender of a religious patriarchal morality, even at the cost of those he loves most.

At the same time various demons—including Rama's strongest opponents—turn out to be good people as well who fight bravely for their country and family and love their wives deeply. Quite a number of them emerge as such convinced devotees of Rama that they are prepared to suffer for their faith. All this qualifies the picture painted in this serial. Rama is a superior champion of justice, but he is not completely spotless. On the other hand, the demons are not wholly evil either. So the struggle in Sagar's RAMAYAN is not one between pure light and pure darkness.

Although all the Rama features follow the classical narration mode, three of them clearly show the feelings Rama is going through: RAM RAJYA, SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN and Sagar's RAMAYAN. In Chapter Two it was argued that it was the motion pictures that followed the mode of the art-cinema narration that revealed Jesus' subjectivity, but the Indian *rasa* doctrine enabled the Indian filmmakers to give expression to the protagonists' feelings within the context of the classic narration mode. Furthermore, a large part of the audience that is interested in mythologicals has a very traditional background. This raises the question if this audience would appreciate films made in accordance with the standards of the art-cinema narration.

Before we come to the conclusion of the present section, mention has to be made of the fact that both LANKA DAHAN and Sagar's RAMAYAN were shot in a sacred environment. This, of course, reinforced the audience's feeling that it saw the vicissitudes of Rama and his entourage in the environment where these had truly taken place. This strengthened the authority of these movies. Moreover, Sagar's serial tends to emphasize more than the other Rama movies that, in spite of all supernatural and magical elements, the story he presents is part of

the ancient history of India. So in his Ramayan a transformation has begun from a more mythological to a more historical point of view. But we also have to realize that Phalke would not have denied either that the Ramayana reflects an epoch of Indian history. By historicizing the Rama legends Sagar attempted to underscore the reality of what was represented and tried to connect it with the desire among the viewers to magnify what they could be proud of in their own country.

The conclusion is justified, however, that, since the first Rama film of 1917, the image of Rama has changed. Although he is still represented as a superior god, his despair as well as his harshness is increasingly brought to the fore. At the same time his opponents became less and less dark and evil or—to put it in the language of Hollywood—the good guys gradually became worse and the bad guys gradually better. Given the successes of these movies, the Indian audience seemed to appreciate this. Therefore, in the course of time Rama became less and less heavenly and acquired more human qualities, while his enemies simultaneously became more human as well. In this way the Rama films made it explicitly clear that the human heart is the true battlefield of the struggle between good and evil.

2. Historical Background

This section will focus on the portrayal of Rama in the Indian tradition. We will see that Rama is not only part of the heritage of the Hindus but also part of the Buddhist and Jain traditions. This section consists of two parts: the first part will concentrate on the visual representation of Rama, whereas the second part will look at the delineation of Rama encountered in 'theological'[19] and literary sources.

[19] Although in the context of Hinduism it is common to call these texts philosophical, I prefer to call them theological, since this expression is a more adequate characterization of the contents of these texts. For a broader conception of the word theology see Ward: 36–49. It is Francis X. Clooney (b. 1950) who elaborates this conception of theology in the field of the study of Hinduism; see, for example, his *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (2001).

2.1. *The Visual Representation of Rama*

The development of the cinematic image of Rama is closely related to the image of Rama in the visual arts.

Over the centuries Hindu iconography was developed to great perfection, the details of which were included in more than 300 texts, the so-called Shilpashastras. The images of the deities had to be in harmony with the proportion doctrine contained in these scriptures. It was claimed that the standards of this doctrine had been revealed to the ancient seers. In the course of time the worship of aniconic objects was increasingly replaced by that of images of deities mostly in the form of the human body. The proportion doctrine taught that the number three was decisive. Therefore, the length of the body had to be nine times that of the face, the shoulder width three times that of the face, etc. In this way, speculation on numbers considered to be so important in these scriptures could be transferred to the human body, as a result of which the hands and feet on the images were relatively wide (Schleberger: 44–47).

The image of Rama always has two arms, thus indicating that he is a human being; gods usually have more than two arms, which makes it clear that they are more powerful than humans. Rama usually wears a conic crown, beautiful ornaments, three-piece floating costumes and wooden sandals. His conic crown reveals that he is a so-called *cakravartin*, a world ruler. In the Ramayana this position is made clear by Rama's performing an *ashvamedha* ceremony, as stated above in the summary of Ram Rajya and Sampoorna Ramayan. Rama has no beard, since in India gods do not wear beards. This is underscored by the fact that in Sagar's Ramayan serial Rama's father, King Dasharath, and his father-in-law, King Janak, both have beards. Rama often has a bow slung over his left shoulder and an arrow or lotus flower in his right hand (Joshi: 172–177; Schleberger: 78–79, 250).

This portrayal, which also serves as the most important cult image of Rama, is a nice depiction of who he really is. That he has two arms indicates that he is human. That he is crowned with a conic crown demonstrates that he is a world ruler. But that he has no beard reveals that he is a god, despite having only two arms. These characteristics reveal that he is a god but one in human form. But as a human being, he is the most excellent of them, since he is a world ruler.

There are also other images of Rama, in particular pictures depicting him in the context of certain episodes of the Ramayana epic. The

oldest of these images are found on a Vishnu temple in Deogarh and on a Shiva temple in Nachna, both dating from around 500 CE. The oldest visual narrative of the Ramayana is also found in Deogarh (Sudhi: 57, 205, 225 images 35; Vatsyayan: 337; Williams: 105–114; 130–137, images 165–170).[20] Kapila Vatsyayan writes:

> One of the notable aspects of these panels from the Deogarh temple, consecrated to Vishnu as Sheshashayi, is that whereas in many of them Vishnu is depicted as a god appearing as Nara-Narayana, in the panels where he appears as Rama he is treated as a human being, two-armed and participating in ordinary human activities. In these panels Rama does not appear as a cult image, nor does he have the divine aura, as one might expect of an incarnation of Vishnu. Although by the fifth century the story of Rama has obviously reached legendary status, his cult images are largely a medieval phenomenon, which suggests that his deification is yet to come. (Vatsyayan: 338)

Nonetheless, the first image that resembled the later cult image of Rama is also from this period, although probably from a slightly later time, and is now in the Garhwa Fort in Allahabad (Sudhi: 205, 226, image 36). Its function and location are not really clear, but for the reason mentioned above by Vatsyayan it is very improbable that it was already a cult image. Similar images, including the one resembling later cult images, were found outside the Indian subcontinent as well, for example on a relief in the 9th-century *Lara Jonggrang* temple in the Indonesian archipelago near the Javanese town of Prambanan. There the image is clearly not a cult image since it is part of the relief (Stutterheim, volume 1: opposite p. 22; volume 2: 11, 15, 39, 40, 42, 44). In his review of the pictorial depiction of Rama in south and southeast Asia Vatsyayan concludes that, although Rama began as a hero, he was deified in India between the 12th and the 16th centuries; this aspect of his character is stressed in practically all Indian versions, even though shades of meaning and colour vary. Outside India, however, he remained a hero—often a romantic hero—and did not become a god following a predetermined path of action. In all versions, including the Buddhist ones, he is the embodiment of good and recognized as such (Vatsyayan: 351).

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[20] Vatsyayan dates the temple of Deogarh already in the 5th century, but the other authors opt for the 6th century, while both of the latter think that the Nachna temple is older.

However, even if he is depicted as a god, he always has a human form, since he never has more than two arms, thus stressing that Rama, if he was a god, was always an incarnated god living within the limits of the human condition, even though his strength was sometimes—if necessary—supernatural.

2.2. *The Ideological Background*

Rama's name is already found in the oldest religious text of India, the Rig Veda (Rig Veda 10,93,14),[21] which is dated between 1500 and 1000 BCE (Michaels: 31–35).[22] It is, however, completely unclear as to who is meant here. Rama could be a god, but he could also be a man. The definitive edition of Valmiki's Ramayana dates from a much later time, around 300 CE, but there were some earlier versions. There was also the Dasharatha Jataka, a Buddhist epic text dating from a somewhat earlier time as well that contains a story about Rama. In this work he is a king who, after an exile of three years, married his sister Shanta and presided over his kingdom called Ramarajya for 1600 years (Whaling: 95–96).

In *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama*, which was published in 1980, the British scholar Frank Whaling gives a profound analysis of the Rama tradition based on the definitive edition of Valmiki's Ramayana, the 15th-century Adhyatma Ramayana and Tulsidas' Manas. He concludes that Valmiki's epic paints Rama as the ideal man, a hero capable of defeating all his opponents, but at the same time an *avatara* of Vishnu. Rama is determined to follow the *dharma*, even if this is to his own disadvantage. Whaling puts it in even stronger terms: if Rama has to choose between two options, he is inclined to choose the way that makes him suffer. The *dharma* he follows is, moreover, the *rajadharma*, the *dharma* of the king, which means that he always has to do what is best and most righteous in the context of his kingdom. That is why he goes into exile and, for the same reason, later banishes Sita, his beloved, from the palace. Nonetheless, some events, including Sita's fire ordeal after the victory over Ravan[23] and her exile continue to

[21] Griffith: 606.

[22] There is a fierce debate on the dating of the Rig Veda, see: Klostermaier: 18–27, and Witzel.

[23] Since the text is in Sanskrit, it uses Ravana instead of Ravan. But the present author prefers to be consistent with the spelling he uses elsewhere in the present study. The same applies to Lakshman.

evoke opposition among the audience and seem to stain his reputation. Although Rama is an *avatara* of Vishnu and therefore divine in having supernatural powers, his feelings of joy about becoming a king or his distress when Sita is abducted by Ravan reveal that he truly is a human being. When Indra asks him if he does not know that he is the highest of the gods, Rama is astonished and replies that he considers himself to be Rama, the son of Dasharath. In other words, he is aware only of his human origins (Whaling: 39–40, 57–62; 64–69; 82–92). Thus, in Valmiki's Ramayana Rama is the ideal man, who only later discovers that his background is essentially divine.

In later Buddhist literature Rama is regarded as a *bodhisattva*, a person on the way to becoming a Buddha, whereas the Jain tradition includes Rama as well as Lakshman and Ravan among the 63 *mahapurusha*s or great figures propagating and developing the Jain doctrines. It is remarkable, however, that Ravan gradually becomes more important than Rama in Jainism. The popularity of Rama waned later in Buddhism as well (Schubring: 234; Whaling: 96–97).

After Valmiki's Ramayana appeared, it was predominantly the poets and dramatists who wrote about Rama in Sanskrit. Some of the most important works of these times were Kalidasha's Raghuvamsha from around 400 CE (Klostermaier: 502; Whaling: 97), Bhatti's Ravanavadha from the 6th or 7th century (Zoetmulder: 227–229) and the works of Bhavabhuti from around 900 (Whaling: 97).[24] Although these artists recognized that Rama was an *avatara* of Vishnu, they concentrated on developing the story of the human Rama, occasionally attempting to save Rama from moral embarrassment (Whaling: 97).

It is not before the 9th century that the first signs of devotion to Rama are found in a literary text, namely in the Perumal Tirumoli, a poem composed by the Keralese king Kulashekhara,[25] who identifies with, for example, Rama's father, King Dasharath, in his lament at the exile of his son. In the same century Rama is also mentioned for the first time in the Skanda Purana, the Padma Purana and the Bhagavata Purana, but Whaling does not consider these references in

[24] Bhatti's Ravanavadha is usually referred to as Bhattikavya (the epic poem of Bhatti) (Zoetmulder: 227). Bhavabhuti wrote four works about Rama called Mahaviracarita, Uttararamacarita, Kundamala and Anargharaghava (Whaling: 97).

[25] This king was one of the so-called Alvars, the first group of *bhakti*-poets of South India (Whaling: 98).

the Puranas to be genuine examples of devotion to Rama (Whaling: 98). Kampan's Iramavataram, which was written in the 12th century, is the next expression of devotion to Rama. 'It is a lyric, not an epic,' Whaling reports. It is clear that the *bhakti* for Rama is growing, even though the examples mentioned do not yet indicate a community of Rama devotees (Whaling: 99). The Yoga Vashishtha, a text written in Kashmir between the 9th and 12th centuries, contains a philosophical dialogue between Vashishtha, the Brahmin priest and teacher of Rama, and his pupil. In this document Rama is a *jivanmukta*, a person who has already attained spiritual deliverance and who will not return to mortal life after he dies. He is also an *avatara*, but the text focuses on the idea of attaining salvation through the spiritual disciplines of *yoga* rather than on *bhakti* (Whaling: 99–100).

The Adhyatma Ramayana is the first work produced in a community of Rama *bhakta*s, the Ramanandis. Its author is unknown, but it was written in the 15th century (Whaling: 112–113). This version of the Ramayana was obviously influenced by Vedanta philosophy. Rama is portrayed not only as an *avatara* of Vishnu but also the manifestation of *brahman nirguna*. *Brahman nirguna* is a term referring to the absolute God without qualities, the highest form of transcendence in Indian philosophy. But Rama is also *saguna brahman*, the absolute God with qualities, who is the creator of the universe, whereas Sita, as his consort, often acts as his *shakti*, the energy by which Rama creates the cosmos, even though she is not conscious of it. As an *avatara* of Vishnu, Rama is at the same time identical to all other *avatara*s of Vishnu. Nonetheless, Rama is a human being as well, since only a human being was able to kill Ravan. In his human form, he is the king who rules his country justly, thus presiding over the *Ramrajya*, a rule and kingdom qualified by complete justice. Furthermore, Rama is delineated as the merciful Lord who promises his devotees that they will attain complete salvation and union with him by following the path of *bhakti* (Whaling: 146–184, 191–203, 211–215). The Adhyatma Ramayana is the first Ramayana edition to state that Rama advises Sita, even before Ravan comes, to enter the fire and to let a shadow take her place during her abduction. The fire ordeal is necessary to let the shadow enter the fire so that the real Sita can emerge from it. In this way this Ramayana edition gives a lucid explanation of one of the scenes that evokes the most opposition in the audience because of Rama's harsh and incomprehensible attitude (Whaling: 126, 138). The emphasis, however, is on Rama as

the absolute God, which is underscored by the view in the Adhyatma Ramayana that human existence is basically mere phenomenal existence. In other words, the reality of human existence is derived from, and for that reason only secondary to, the existence of *nirguna Brahman*. It is therefore illusory. So, in its emphasis on the identity of Rama with the absolute God the Adhyatma Ramayana creates a new problem: it questions the humanity of Rama and, as a consequence, his being the lord of *bhakti* as well (Whaling: 216–218).

The Rama versions composed outside India continued to paint Rama as a hero without any divine characteristics. Furthermore, a Rama *bhakti* did not develop in these areas (Vatsyayan: 351; Whaling: 100–101).

In 1577 Tulsidas completed his Ramcaritmanas, which created a new stage in the development of the portrayal of Rama. At this time the movement of the Sants, which was inspired by Kabir (1440–1518) and Nanak (1469–1539), gained a great deal of influence in Northern India. The Sants used the name of Rama for God, but they neglected the fact that the Rama character of the Rama tradition was an *avatara* of Vishnu. For that reason Tulsidas emphasized the point that Rama was an *avatara* (Whaling: 226). Although Tulsidas did not add much to the views contained in Valmiki's Ramayana and the Adhyatma Ramayana, his work succeeded in making Rama popular among common people in Northern India. Of course, it was helpful that the Manas was written in Hindi and not in Sanskrit, but that was not the only reason for its popularity. More than the Adhyatma Ramayana, the Ramcaritmanas emphasizes Rama's human side, since it is first and foremost interested in Rama's human vicissitudes. So it relates many details about Rama's youth, wedding and the time before his exile. Rama is furthermore portrayed as a righteous king who maintains the *dharma*, and as a *kshatriya* who combats every being that has evil intentions. His struggle culminates in the defeat of the mightiest of them, Ravan. In the Manas the *dharma* also entails support for the caste system, including the top position of the Brahmans. Rama is, moreover, of superior goodness, having an ideal character and being friendly and full of mercy towards all beings around him. He is the ideal son, the ideal brother, the ideal husband, the ideal friend and the ideal king who presides over *Ramrajya*, a kingdom characterized by a policy of exemplary justice. The only spots on his superior and exemplary humanity are his goading of Shurpanakha, Ravan's sister, who attempted to seduce him, his killing of Bali and the statements in which he reveals an inferior opinion of women (Whaling: 253–255, 259). It has already been stated above

that Tulsidas changed the content of his Uttarakanda completely by placing the return to Ayodhya in it and by replacing Sita's exile with a dialogue between the crow Bhushundi and the eagle Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu, on the meaning of Rama's incarnation.

Rama is also a manifestation of the absolute God (*Brahman nirguna*), the creator God and lord of the devotees (*saguna Brahman*), and an *avatara* of Vishnu. But at the same time, Shiva is a great friend of Rama, who is filled with warm devotion towards him. More important than his being a manifestation of the absolute God in all his aspects is his name, since the two forms of the *brahman* are revealed in the name of Rama (Whaling: 272, 292). The Dutch theologian and indologist Jan Peter Schouten (b. 1949) adds that the name of Rama is also more important because it gives people insight into the complete cosmic reality of the Divine, of which *Brahman nirguna* is merely one aspect (Schouten: 171). In fact, the influence of the Sants is recognizable here. It is clear that Rama transcends Vishnu in the Manas. He *is Brahman* and becomes God in any conceivable form playing his *lila* (play) in his human existence in which he rules as king in Ayodhya. It is significant that at the end of Tulsidas' work Rama does not return to his form as Vishnu but continues to rule over Ayodhya. So the *Ramrajya* never came to an end (Whaling: 308–315).

Rama's name is also important for another reason: everyone who recites or chants the name will be saved (Whaling: 290–291). The Ramcaritmanas is full of *bhakti* which is even more important than the *dharma* (Whaling: 300–303). The work also portrays the *bhakti* various characters feel for Rama. Exemplary is the devotion of Rama's brother Bharat, the demon Vibhishan and the monkey Hanuman. Sita's feelings for her beloved are also not so much stamped by eroticism as by the *bhakti* she feels for her lord (Whaling: 234–235, 242). Rama's humanity is underscored by the sorrow he feels when Sita is abducted or when his brother Lakshman is close to death. When Sita is abducted, Rama seems to have forgotten that she was only a shadow of his real beloved, since the Manas follows the Adhyatma Ramayana in disclosing that the real Sita entered the fire before her abduction and returns from the fire during the fire ordeal. In the Manas Sita is more a person of flesh and blood during this period than she is a shadow (Whaling: 247). In conclusion, it may be said that the Ramcaritmanas portrays Rama as a real human being who evokes *bhakti* in the many beings around him. But at the same time he is God in any conceivable form, transcending even Vishnu himself.

After the praise of Rama in Krittivasa's Ramapañcali, the ethical positions of Rama were increasingly questioned in Bengali literature, in particular his killing of Bali and his treatment of Sita. In the 16th century the female author Candravati wrote a new version of the Ramayana in which she compacts the battle scenes and expands all the episodes dealing with women's experiences. She thus turns it into a sustained account of the suffering inherent in being a woman. She does not have Sita blame Rama—Sita can think of no better life than being married to Rama. But the Oriya writers Shankaradeva and Durgavara depict Rama as a mean-spirited man casting doubt on Sita's fidelity. In the Uttara-kanda of Shankaradeva's version Sita remarks: 'All speak well of Rama but I know that for me he is like Death itself.' In his Sitara Banabasa of 1860 the Bengal author Vidyasagar, however, describes in relentless length Rama's sorrow at Sita's absence during her exile, so that Rama is not undeserving of devotion. Could Vidyasagar have thought of this apologia if he had not found Rama's conduct indefensible? Still later, Rama's authority became also more and more disputable in Bengal more modern literature, even to the degree that Rama became the subject of satire and comics (Bose).

In retrospect it can be concluded that Rama started as a man, a hero, who excelled in following the *dharma*, even if it entailed suffering for him. He was a man who defeated the worst demons of his time and subsequently ruled as a king over a kingdom where *Ramrajya*, exemplary justice, prevailed. He was regarded afterwards as an *avatara* of Vishnu, a manifestation of the absolute God, but only on the Indian subcontinent. His name even developed into the term for God in Northern India. He became the lord of his devotees. Tulsidas' Ramcaritmanas put his humanity in the foreground again, emphasizing his love and mercy for everyone, even his greatest enemies. The devotion to Rama flourished as never before, but criticism later grew, in particular in Oriya and Bengal literature, given that Rama's attitude towards Bali and even more towards Sita, who had been faithful to him in extremely difficult circumstances, became increasing incomprehensible.

The Rama films discussed in the present chapter reflect different elements of the Ramayana tradition. Some seem to draw more from one Ramayana version, others from another and there are also pictures that reflect more than one version. Phalke's Lanka Dahan of 1917 gives the most supernatural depiction of Rama. In the only existing remnant of the movie he appears as an omnipresent God who sees his wife looking at his ring. Although it can no longer be verified, it

is highly probable that his humanity was displayed in the rest of the film. Otherwise, the conclusion is justified that LANKA DAHAN reflects most the portrayal of Rama in the Adhyatma Ramayana. Vijay Bhatt's BHARAT MILAP shows the extraordinary devotion Bharat feels for his brother Rama. This is found in the Ramcaritmanas in particular. RAM RAJYA, his second film, however, depends on Valmiki's Ramayana, since it displays the Uttarakanda and reveals how Rama suffers because of the absence of his beloved, but his *rajadharma*, the rules for a king, make her banishment inevitable. Nonetheless, the picture places more emphasis on Sita's suffering, the incomprehension in Lakshman's heart and the indignation Rama's own sons express about a king who listens to gossip and does not do justice to his own wife and to women in general. This reflects the growing discomfort present in later Oriya and Bengal literature. Mistri's SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN portrays a righteous Rama in accordance with the whole Rama tradition, but he also gives a more sympathetic portrayal of the demons. Some of them are actually good beings and can even be devotees of Rama, something also displayed in the Adhyatma Ramayana and the Manas. In the end, even Ravan turns out to be a devotee of Rama, an aspect found in Krittivasa's Ramapañcali. This film also reflects the indignation in later Bengali and Oriya literature about Sita's being exiled because of the distrust of the laundryman. Remarkably, Rama succeeds in persuading Lakshman to take Sita to Valmiki's ashram only by referring first to his fraternal love and then commanding him to do so. It is the *rajadharma* that is decisive.

Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN reflects first and foremost Tulsidas' Manas, even though he also draw elements from the other Ramayana versions and inserted some novelties. Rama's suffering is emphasized, which underscores his humanity and reflects Valmiki's version. Nonetheless, the conclusion seems justified that Tulsidas' Ramcaritmanas seems to have had the most impact, which agrees with the tremendous influence this work has in contemporary Hinduism, in particular in Northern India. In this part of the subcontinent it is still the most widely known and recited version of the Ramayana (Klostermaier: 66–67; Lutgendorf 1991: 1 and 12; Schouten: 165).

Thus, the conclusion is justified that Sagar, like the producers of the most successful and most popular Jesus films, linked up with ideas about Rama that were the most widespread among the Hindus. His serial became a great success because the viewers saw their own view of Rama in it.

3. The Importance of Seeing in Hinduism

Whereas the Abrahamic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, tend to accentuate that real transcendence is ineffable and certainly cannot be represented in images, Hinduism is inclined to give great importance to images. In Vedic times it was different, since there were no images of the Vedic deities (Choudhury: 205; Flood: 40–41; Pal: 38; Sugirtharaja: 166–167). Hinduism later developed in the completely opposite direction: the image of the godhead received a central place, at least in popular religion.

In the experience of *darshan* the gaze of the gods can be very powerful and in some cases can even lead to death. But the divine gaze is usually auspicious. Many Hindus make long pilgrimages or are eager to attend important festivals and ceremonies to see the deity and receive *darshan* (Eck: 3–7). For many viewers, watching movies in film theatres and on television is *darshan* as well (M.M. Prasad: 75–77; Lutgendorf 1990: 145).

The publications by Philip Lutgendorf, who did profound research into the Ramayana *katha* tradition, indicate that it is possible to discern a great similarity between what happens in the *katha* and what occurs when Hindus watch religious movies. A *katha* is a ritual in which a person makes a *puja*, a sacrifice before the image of a deity, and part of the Hindu religious scriptures is read and explained. The ritual is usually performed in close co-operation with a priest, usually a Brahman. The reading and explaining can last only a few minutes, as I myself experienced in Suriname, but it can also be extended into a festival lasting several days. Often a famous performer, in most cases a storyteller or a priest, is asked to give *katha* in that case. These storytellers, who also expound the narratives and the lessons of the sacred texts, are usually, although not necessarily, Brahmans. If this individual has a high reputation because of his extraordinary narrative qualities, he will attract many people, which will increase the name and fame of the person organizing the *katha* (Lutgendorf 1991: 113–247). Vasudha Dalmia-Lüderitz points out that the recitation is removed from the immediate surroundings, since it stems from an authorative religious text and is in a language removed from the present (Dalmia-Lüderitz: 210). Thus, the audience is immediately carried away to a divine world. *Bhajan*s or religious songs are usually sung by a so-called *bhajan* group before, during and at the end of the ceremony. If the audience knows the songs, they will join in the singing.

It is clear that a *katha* includes four elements that are also important in many films, particularly the religious ones: *darshan*, a narrative, devotional songs and, in a number of cases, a prominent role played by a Brahman—for example, because a Brahman acted as the director and therefore as the narrator. During the *katha* the audience watches the image of the deity, while a Brahman priest or storyteller explains the scriptures via beautiful narratives accompanied by songs sung by a *bhajan* group. The spectators are almost always carried away to the world of the divine. In modern times, the storytellers who were able to give appealing explanations were asked to perform on radio or on television (Lutgendorf 1991: 432).

Although there were Brahmans who did not like films, those who were positive about the new medium seem to have won the upper hand in Hinduism. It is very likely that within Hindu circles the great popularity of the mythologicals in the first decades of the history of the Indian film industry only reinforced the conviction that they were right. For many Hindus, these mythologicals were apparently comparable to—and probably more attractive than—the explanations presented at a *katha*.

This also explains why Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN pays so much attention to the feelings of his characters. Sagar himself was stamped by the *katha* tradition and knew the ropes of this trade. He knew that the audience was fond of the small stories about what the characters themselves felt so they could identify with them. In addition, Sagar's serial devotes a great deal of space to the wise lessons by the gurus and of Rama himself. This is also a reflection on what happens in a *katha*. A narrator not only wishes to entertain his audience but also wants to teach them the wise lessons the tradition contains, so that they have a better life in the future and are better able to cope with bad and evil persons and situations.

The above picture needs some modification, however. The Indian scholar Anuradha Roma Choudury writes:

> Hindus do not believe that the image itself is Vishnu or Shiva, but accept it as a symbol of the deity. They pray not to the image, but to the deity personified by the image. Though Hindus believe in a formless Absolute God (*brahman*), their prayers are strengthened if there is a tangible object of devotion in front of them. The difficulty of comprehending an abstract Absolute entity as God necessitates a symbolic representation in a concrete form, a *murti* (literally: 'crystallization'), so that the mind can concentrate upon it. (Choudhury: 205)

In other words, an image is never identical with God—it is no more than a symbol. Moreover, Hindus believe that during every ritual the godhead has to descend into his or her image. So there is always some distance between the image and God. Those Hindus who claim to have deeper insight hold that the absolute God itself is *Brahman nirguna* (Choudhury: 212), God without qualities, and therefore impossible to depict. As a consequence, there are also Hindus who never perform rituals for or worship images. They prefer to follow the ways of reasoning and logic, of meditation and contemplation (Choudhury: 212). It is clear that these Hindus will never agree with the Rama devotees who claim that Rama himself is *Brahman nirguna*. They hold that the gods and semi-gods in film may be important for ordinary Hindus, including many Rama devotees, but those who have deeper understanding—like themselves—know that *Brahman* itself transcends all these images. So, Hinduism also includes those who do not believe that real transcendence can be depicted, even though in their view this is more a matter of deeper insight than of prohibitions.

The German scholar Klaus K. Klostermaier (b. 1933) remarks, however, that 'the average Hindu still sees in the images a real and physical presence of God and not only a symbolic one' (Klostermaier: 267).

In any event, the great majority of the Hindus, including many who belong to the religious elite, became fond of the new medium almost immediately. One of the most important reasons for this is probably their completely different attitude towards images of the divine.

4. The Modern Ramayana *Kathas*

The stimulus for making films about Rama was given by the Jesus films, but the material and the context from which the first filmmakers drew the content for their movies was the mythological heritage of Hinduism, in particular the great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The producers derived the settings and scenery from folk theatre, in particular the Parsi theatre, and from the many popular images of Victorian background printed at the end of the 19th century. All this gave the movies a specific Indian flavour, although somewhat different from the ancient traditional pictorial depiction of the images in the Ajanta caves, for example. The possibility of adding sound to the films created the opportunity to make films that followed the details of the tradition of the Indian folk theatre more closely than before, since

songs and music were part and parcel of this form of theatre. This gave a new impetus to the popularity of cinema.

A great number of mythologicals were released, including many Rama movies. Five of them became major box-office successes all over India. These five were not very different from each other, all following the traditional pattern of the Indian classical films including the classical narration mode. Although later filmmakers were certainly interested in the subjectivity of the main protagonists of their movies, they did not make use of the art-cinema narration to give expression to these feelings. Instead, they used the traditional narration modes of Indian folk theatre, which give their movies a melodramatic character. But the great majority of their audience loved it. It is important to realize that many Brahmans, the same group that plays a predominant part in performing *katha*s, also played a prominent role in this development. Furthermore, Phalke's LANKA DAHAN and Sagar's RAMAYAN were shot in sacred locations, which of course reinforced the authority of these movies among the viewers. Moreover, Sagar's serial emphasized that it was about an important epoch of Indian history, thus historicizing India's mythical past somewhat to underscore the reality of what was represented and to increase the pride of the viewers in their own country.

The first Rama film, LANKA DAHAN, portrayed Rama as a supernatural God who took pleasure in the love Sita felt for him. In this movie Hanuman is still a real monkey swinging from branch to branch in the trees of the park. In the second great Rama film, BHARAT MILAP, Rama is first and foremost the hero who stands above emotion and is faithful to the *dharma*. He is full of love towards the people around him, but at the same time his love is full of wisdom, constantly achieving what is just and what has to be prevented. When the people around him are overwhelmed by emotions, he helps them to overcome them and to return to what is right. In RAM RAJYA, however, this focus on his royal *dharma* and therefore on the will of the people turns into a weakness, because he does not intervene on behalf of those who are victims of the desires of the people. thus tolerating the injustice with which they are treated. Mistri's SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN also underscores this view of Rama, but this movie also shows that the demons are not simply wicked. Even Ravan turns out to have good qualities and, when he dies, he reveals that he also was a devotee of Rama. The line between good and evil becomes blurred. Nonetheless, Rama continues to be a good and wise personality who is faithful to the *dharma*. He is the incarnation of the god Vishnu and a supreme hero who vanquishes all adversaries.

It was, however, the spectacular special effects that gained this film its high reputation. The last film, Sagar's RAMAYAN, also depicts Rama as a divine figure. Essentially, it is the portrayal given by Tulsidas, showing Rama's despair, that reinforces his humanity. Both monkeys and demons are also more human than actually apelike or demonic. Furthermore, almost all monkeys and many demons are devotees of Rama, with the exception of Ravan. The latter, however, is a magnificent and skilful king. His only sin is that he abducts Sita, threatens her and is unwilling to return her to Rama. In the later part of the film, the love between Ravan's son Indrajit and his wife Sulochana seems to be deeper than that between Rama and Sita. Rama's harsh attitude towards Sita remains incomprehensible despite Sagar's opinion that the fire ordeal was necessary to get the real Sita back. Nonetheless, the depiction of Rama is less dark than in RAM RAJYA and SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN, since in his serial Sagar followed the Uttarakanda version of Tulsidas' Manas.

The conclusion is justified, however, that the depiction of Rama has altered since the first Rama film. Although he is still represented as a superior god, his despair as well as his harshness is increasingly brought to the fore. At the same time, his opponents became less and less dark and evil. Thus, in a way the Rama films increasingly revealed that the human heart is basically the true battlefield of the struggle between good and evil.

The latest great success, Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN, which reflected much of Tulsidas' Manas, which is the most well-known and popular Ramayana version of Northern India, demonstrated again, just like the most successful and most popular Jesus films, that the movies that link up with the most common ideas of the ordinary believers have the greatest chance of becoming successful.

The trend in the cinematic depiction of Rama reflected less the development in the pictorial depiction than that in the literature on Rama. In the pictorial depiction he developed more and more into the great lord who deserves the devotion of the people seeking refuge with him. Nonetheless, his two arms reveal that he is a human being, although his conic crown and royal vestments make clear that, as a world ruler, he was the greatest of all human beings. More critical voices were heard in the literature, something that is more or less reflected in the portrayals by RAM RAJYA and SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN.

The most important conclusion, however, is that the mythologicals, and certainly also the Rama films, developed into modern *katha*s, where

believers could be blessed by the divine gaze of their lord and listen to his wise lessons and his deep emotional songs, since a song can reveal the voice of God. Millions were attracted to these films to experience the same deep emotions felt by those who visited the *katha*s of the past and present. But there were also Hindus who felt more at home with the philosophical aspect of their religion, which does not employ images and *katha*s.

CHAPTER FOUR

BUDDHA

The first feature film about Buddha was produced in India in 1923, by the then famous Hindu producer of mythologicals, Dada Saheb Phalke. The fact that a film about the founder of Buddhism was made by a non-Buddhist filmmaker is characteristic of the production of motion pictures about Buddha, since most of these films were made by people who felt great affinity for Buddha but were not regarded as Buddhists. The desire to make money played an important role as well, of course. Another characteristic of the Buddha films is that they were produced all over the world in various countries with different film industries, whereas the great Jesus features were produced in Western countries and the great Rama movies were made in India. Buddha films were produced in India, Japan and Korea. Some pictures made in India had Western directors. Related films, such as Bernardo Bertolucci's The Little Buddha of 1993 and Martin Meissonnier's La Vie de Bouddha (Life of Buddha) of 2001, were made in Western countries like the United States and France. The Little Buddha is the story of an American boy who is supposed to be a reincarnation of the Tibetan *Lama* Dorje,[1] but the picture also includes a narration of Buddha's life story. La Vie de Bouddha is a documentary film.

In the first section of this chapter we will provide an outline of the history of the Buddha films that could be retrieved and analyze them. We will discover that some important Buddha films have been lost. If possible, we will present reviews and impressions that have been found in other authors. In the second section we will compare the portraits in the motion pictures with the portrayal of Buddha in Buddhist tradition and in the third section we will discuss the hesitation Buddhists have with respect to having their founder's life story depicted in film. In the last section we will make some preliminary observations.

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[1] *Lama* is the Tibetan title for a *guru* or spiritual teacher, usually Buddhist monks or nuns who are older or have a special charisma. But a layperson accomplished in meditation or tantric rituals may also become a revered master (Harvey: 134 and 218).

The spelling of the names is a special problem. In this chapter we will use the Pali spelling, even though the Sanskrit spelling is better known in Western world. The various films and various Buddhist sources use different names and spellings. The oldest Buddhist texts use the Pali spelling, which means that they do not use the Sanskrit name Siddhartha for the Enlightened One, but always Siddhattha.[2] Nor do they use the term *nirvana*, which is Sanskrit, but the Pali *nibbana*. Furthermore, they use the Pali word *bodhisatta* instead of the more well-known Sanskrit term *bodhisattva*. Therefore, we will use *nibbana* and *bodhisatta* here as well. The texts and films refer to Siddhattha's mother variously as Mahamaya, Mayadevi and Maya. In the present study she will simply be called Maya, since this name is used in an old text, the Buddhavamsa, whereas both other names can be regarded as embellishments of this name, which makes it probable that Maya was original and both Mahamaya and Mayadevi derivative. With regard to the name of Siddhattha's wife, we will use the name used in the film or text being discussed, since the name that is used is also something that will be discussed in the analyses. In the Tipitaka, the oldest sources to give information about Buddha, his wife remains unnamed, but a commentary discloses that she was Bhadda Kaccana, one of the 13 nuns mentioned in the Anguttara Nikaya (Anguttara Nikaya 1,25),[3] which is part of the Tipitaka. Gopa is the name mentioned in the Lalitavistara whereas the name of Yashodhara is used in the Buddhacarita, the Nidanakatha and Mahavastu.[4] The German indologist Hans Wolfgang Schumann (b. 1928) asserts that the Pali sources also mention the name of Bimbadevi (Schumann: 37).[5] We will also discuss two Hindi films, in which the names, of course, follow the Hindi spelling. These will also

[2] The truth of this statement is questionable, since the Tipitaka speaks about Gotama (Brewster: 12–15). The British Buddhologist Peter Harvey speaks of Siddhattha Gotama (Harvey: 1). Unfortunately he does not clarify where he found the name Siddhattha. The first text to use Siddhattha is the Nidanakatha. Both the Buddhacarita and the Lalitavistara call him Sarvarthasiddha (Buddhacarita 2,17 and 46—Schotsman: 24 and 30; Goswami: 94ff.; Rhys Davids: 162–200; Thomas: 44). Another problem is that Buddha himself did not speak Pali but an old version of Magadhi. Pali is a written language and probably never was a spoken informal language (Von Hinüber: 4–6).

[3] Thomas: 49; Woodward: 22. As in Chapter Two (see note 18), in the notation we will be using here, the references in parentheses in the text are to the original source and those in the footnotes to the published editions.

[4] See sections 3.1 and 3.2 on the dating of these texts.

[5] Unfortunately, he does not mention his sources. Moreover, he himself prefers to use the name Bhadda Kaccana (Schumann: 37, 60, 119–120, 238).

be changed to their Pali form. For example, Siddhattha will be used instead of Siddharth and Devadatta instead of Devdut.

1. The Films

The history of the Buddha films differs completely from that of the Jesus and Rama pictures. In fact, only two feature films on Buddha became major successes: the early The Light of Asia produced in the era of silent film and The Little Buddha of 1993. Two other Buddha features that had some success were Dada Saheb Phalke's Buddhadev and Shaka (English title: Buddha) produced by the Japanese filmmaker Kenji Misumi (1921–1975) in 1961. Buddhadev probably shared the success of almost all Phalke's movies, while Shaka was screened in cinema theatres in Japan as well as in the United States, although it had problems attracting many viewers in the States (*Variety Film Reviews*, 3 July 1963). Unfortunately, I was not able to view either of these two films nor was I able to view Seokgamoni (English title: Buddha) by the Korean filmmaker Jang Il-ho in 1964. In 1995 the Indian film company Padmalaya Telefilms released a long serial on Buddha called Buddha. As far as I know, it has not been screened in any cinema and was broadcast by only one unimportant broadcasting company. Furthermore, the picture was sold in video and DVD format in shops and on the internet. In 2008 a new Buddha film was released in the Indian city of Hyderabad. The producer of this Telugu picture called Tathagata Buddha is K. Raja Sekhar. Just like its Hindi predecessor Buddha, this film has not been screened in film theaters either but sold only in videos and DVD format.

In addition, some documentary films about Buddha were produced, the most successful of them being Gotama the Buddha, which was made with the support of the Indian government in 1957. The other important documentary film is Martin Meissonnier's Life of Buddha, which the Buddhists themselves like to use as an information film.

As a result, in this chapter we will focus on the following three feature films depicting the life of Buddha: The Light of Asia, The Little Buddha and Buddha. We will also look at Tathagata Buddha, but unfortunately a real analysis is impossible for reasons that will be explained later. Further, we will pay some attention to the two documentary films, Gotama the Buddha and Life of Buddha as well. The documentaries will not be analyzed; we are interested only in

their views of Buddha. All the films will be discussed, however, within a framework outlining the history of the production of Buddha films starting with the era of silent film.

1.1. *The Era of Silent Film*

Buddhadev

The first feature film about Buddha was BUDDHADEV or LORD BUDDHA, produced by Dada Saheb Phalke in 1923. It was an Indian black-and-white silent movie about which unfortunately nothing more is known than the facts mentioned above.

The Light of Asia

Copies of the second Buddha film have, fortunately, been preserved. This picture, again a black-and-white film, called THE LIGHT OF ASIA or PREM SANYAS (Love and Asceticism) in Hindi, was an initiative by Himansu Rai (1892–1940), an Indian who had travelled to Europe in 1924 to promote his plans. He found a willing ear at the German Emelka film company in Munich, which sent the German director Franz Osten, the pseudonym of Franz Ostermayr (1876–1956), a cameraman and assistants to India. Himansu Rai provided the cast. The film was shot in India at two locations: near the great Buddhist temple of Bodh Gaya and, thanks to the collaboration of the *raja* of Jaipur, in one of his courts in Rajasthan. Emelka processed the film, although the picture was given English titles. Himansu Rai himself played the role of Buddha, whereas Seeta Devi played the role of Gopa, the wife and beloved of Buddha. Seeta Devi (or Sita Devi) was the pseudonym of Renee Smith, an Anglo-Indian girl of only 13 years old (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 94–95; Dwyer 2006a: 21; Shah: 24–25; Website *IMDb*).

The focus of this picture was the European market. Although it received favourable criticism in India, it did not become a success there. It ran only for two weeks on the subcontinent. It did attract a large audience in Europe, particularly in Central Europe, and ran in London for ten months (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 96; Shah: 24–25).

Niranjan Pal wrote the script while deriving some titles intersecting the film from Sir Edwin Arnold's (1832–1904) poem *The Light of Asia*, which was somewhat famous at the time. The film's story, however, deviates greatly from the content of Sir Edwin Arnold's book, particularly in the last quarter of the movie.

The film is divided into six acts.

The first act starts with a tour showing some great religious centres of India. They are the Muslim Jama Mosque, which is described as 'the largest place of worship in the world', Varanasi (Benares),[6] described as 'one of the oldest cities in the world—looked upon by Hindoos as the Holy of Holies', and finally Bodh Gaya, 'famed for its Temple of Buddha'. India, 'the land of many wonders and many contrasts where the relic of an age-old civilisation still holds its magic sway over its teeming population', is clearly delineated as a country that includes perhaps the most important sacred places of three world religions. In other words, no other country is holier than India.

After this introduction, images are shown of a group of Western tourists visiting the holy site of Bodh Gaya and meeting an old Indian ascetic who tells them the Buddha's life story. It starts with the sorrow of Queen Maya, King Suddhodana's consort, who seems to be unable to bear children. The king is advised to look for another heir and therefore an elephant is sent into the capital to find a boy to become the king's son. The elephant returns to the palace without having found any boy. When the king gives an audience later, the queen is travelling to her parents and she gives birth to a son during her journey. At the same time, the sage Asita announces to the king in the capital that he has a son 'who shall deliver men from ignorance or rule the world'. The king goes to the queen, sharing her joy that they have a son. But the queen dies shortly afterward and is buried under a rain of flowers.

In act two it becomes clear that Gautama, as Suddhodana's son is called, has a great horror of hunting and killing animals for pleasure. He quarrels with his cousin Devadatta over a swan the latter has shot. Gautama rescues the swan, but his cousin claims that the swan is his. The king's ministers decide that the bird belongs to Gautama, since '[t]he slayer spoils and wastes—the cherisher sustains'. Devadatta is furious. Later, the king has a bad dream. A sage is consulted and he advises the king to let his son marry: 'Weave the spell of woman's smiles and wiles about his idle heart'. They travel around and then Gautama falls in love with Gopa, the daughter of another king.

The third act relates how Gautama defeats his rival princes in the martial arts, which consist of lancing a cactus leaf on the ground at full gallop, hitting his own drum with an arrow while blindfolded, and, finally, unseating his main rival, his cousin Devadatta, from his horse. Gautama is thus given permission to marry Gopa.

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[6] The official name of Benares is now Varanasi, which will be used in the present study.

The fourth act shows the marriage ceremony and relates the king's decision to keep the prince within the boundaries of the palace, where 'no mention should be made of death or age, sickness or pain'. Suddenly, however, the prince is struck by a feeling of deep depression. He decides to ride out the next morning and to leave the palace. The king commands the inhabitants of the city to keep the 'sick and the aged, the beggar and the maimed . . . hidden till the setting of the sun'. Nonetheless, an old man comes up to the prince, and Gautama talks with him and then gets down from the chariot. Shortly afterward he sees a sick man and subsequently six people carrying a dead body from a house. Impressed by what he sees, he orders his charioteer to return to the palace.

The fifth act starts with the command of the king to triple the guard at the gates of the palace. It is in vain, for Gautama's soul is 'full of pity for the sickness of the world'. During the night he looks long and intensely at his wife, Princess Gopa, but at the same time sees the poor man, the sick person, and the dead body in his mind. He gets up to leave the court but then hesitates and stops. Suddenly, he seems to hear a voice saying: 'This is the night—choose thou the way of greatness or the way of good.' Gautama returns to Gopa and looks at her again, but then his decision is unalterable. Passing the sleeping dancing girls, he reaches the charioteer's quarters. Both Guatama and his charioteer mount the prince's horse and leave the palace, finally dismounting after a long ride. Gautama gives his royal vestments, along with his sword, helmet and sandals, to the charioteer and commands him to return to the palace. He then turns and walks away. In the next sequence the charioteer enters Princess Gopa's room just as she is waking up. A deep sorrow fills Gopa's heart when she hears the charioteer's message and takes Gautama's belongings. A servant attempts to comfort her and then the king enters her room. He sees Gautama's belongings on Gopa's stomach. After the king has sent the others away, the princess embraces him and says: 'Father, you have lost your son, but I have lost my all.' In an attempt to comfort her, the king embraces her.

The sixth act opens with images of royal cavaliers searching for prince Gautama. In the meantime Gautama changes clothes with a beggar who leaps gladly away. At the same time Gopa is in the palace garden, refusing all delicacies offered to her. Because of his fashionable dress, the beggar attracts the attention of the cavaliers and they arrest hem. Suddenly Devadatta appears before Gopa; he approaches the princess saying: 'I want you.' She turns her back to him. He then grabs her, but she breaks away from him and flees to a servant. She sends Devadatta away and after he leaves she is comforted by the servant. Nonetheless, the incident incites Gopa to look for Gautama. In the meantime, the king and his ministers interrogate the beggar. This is reported to Gopa, after which she takes off her beautiful chains and gives them to her servant. Meanwhile, Gautama begs for food at a house he passes and is given something to eat. Gopa leaves the palace to find her beloved. Gautama meditates under a

> palm tree at the seashore and continues his journey later. He then sits down under a fig tree, the *bodhi* tree,[7] under which he meditates 'until deliverance' comes.
>
> Next, Gautama, who is called the Buddha after his enlightenment, continues wandering through the countryside. He passes a group of ascetics performing severe austerities and convinces them to stop. He subsequently passes by some men with a herd of goats. One of them is already lifting his arm to chop a goat's head off in order to sacrifice it to the deities when Buddha succeeds in persuading him to stop killing animals, saying: 'How can you, who pray for mercy to the Gods, be so merciless?' Meanwhile, Gopa is still looking for her beloved. She asks passersby repeatedly if they have seen him, but in vain. However, 'just when she had abandoned all hope', she sees many people walking to an open spot in the forest. There she sees her beloved preaching: 'Evil swells the debts to pay. Good delivers and acquits. Shun evil, follow good; hold sway over thyself. This is the way.' Gopa sits down in the midst of the audience that has gathered. Buddha continues and says: 'I despised sorrow, but now I know that it is only a passing phase; I sought happiness and now I know that it lies in giving.' At the end of his sermon Buddha greets the crowd in front of him and leaves. He finds Gopa who had left earlier. She kneels at his feet, but Buddha lifts her up. She nestles up to him; they talk and Buddha points to the crowd that is still waiting for him. They talk again. 'And thus, with the passage of years, the Prince, in tattered robe—with Gopa as his first convert—became one of the greatest teachers the world has ever known.'
>
> So the Indian ascetic in front of the temple of Bodh Gaya ends his story and the film ends as well.

Although the motion picture has the same title as Sir Edwin Arnold's book, it differs from it greatly. Aside from the great number of minor deviations, the main differences are that Arnold's work attempts to give a sound delineation of the ideas and doctrines of Buddha, whereas the film gives a only a very brief indication. Another important difference is that in Arnold's work Buddha has a child with his wife (who is, moreover, called Yashodhara). Their child is called Rahula. Nonetheless there are also some similarities. Arnold's book ends with a sermon given by Buddha with his son sitting on his knees and his wife sitting somewhere close by. After his sermon Buddha kisses his son's hem and humbly asks him to enter the *sangha*, the order of the Buddhist monks and nuns, which he does. Arnold writes: 'Thus passed these Three into the Path' (Arnold 1926: 176). In other words the family,

[7] Tree of enlightenment.

which was horribly torn apart by Buddha's decision to leave the palace, is reunited. The book then ends with a short summary of the rest of Buddha's life and a declaration by the author that he takes his refuge in the Buddha, the law of good, which refers to Buddha's teachings, and Buddha's order. In a similar way, the film ends when Buddha and Gopa are reunited in the *sangha* as well. Gopa is even called his first disciple, which goes absolutely against Buddhist tradition. Both 'happy ends' are unfamiliar to the Buddhist tradition but suitable to the romantic tastes of a Western audience. Buddhist tradition also relates that both Yashodhara and Rahula enter the *sangha* indeed, but there is nothing known about Buddha as a father kissing the hem of his son who is sitting on his knees.

The quality of the shots in The Light of Asia varies widely. The film has shots taken from a great distance as well as some close-ups. The close-ups of Gopa when she is in distress because of Gautama's departure or when she is desperately looking for her beloved are moving. Generally, the music is rather monotonous. But it is remarkable that the melody of Adam Drese's *Seelenbrautigam*, which is the melody of Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf's popular hymn 'Jesus, Still Lead On' (Website *Oremus.org*), is played at the moment Gautama sees six men carrying a dead body. Thus, the feelings this very tragic moment evoke are channelled by a moving song so well known in Christianity.

The concentration on the relationship between Buddha and Gopa and the music of *Seelenbrautigam* reveal that the filmmakers preferred pleasing Western audiences instead of their Indian viewers. So it is no surprise that the feature was far more successful in the West than in India.

There was no other Buddha film during this period.

1.2. *The Era of Sound*

Daibutsu Kaigen

It was not until the 1950s that a new Buddha film was released, this time in Japan. On 20 March 1952 Daibutsu kaigen (Saga of the Great Buddha), by the Japanese producer Teinosuke Kinugasa (1896–1982), premiered. It was nominated for the 1953 Cannes Film Festival. Kinugasa was a good filmmaker, since he won an Oscar for the best foreign film for his 1953 Jigokumon (Gate of Hell) at the 1954 Cannes Festival (Website *IMDb*). Unfortunately, this is all that is known about this feature.

Shaka

The next feature about Buddha was also released in Japan. This film, called SHAKA, premiered on 1 November 1961. Director Kenji Misumi (1921–1975) made the movie for the Daiei Motion Picture Company. The story is that the success of Henry Koster's THE ROBE (1953), which refers indirectly to the life story of Jesus, inspired Daiei to produce a motion picture about the life of Buddha (Richie: 178). The Japanese viewers seemed to have welcomed the film, since it was the first one screened in panorama format (Komatsu: 719). Two years later, on 2 July 1963, a shortened version of the picture was released in the United States with a new title, BUDDHA. This version lasts 139 minutes, whereas the original version lasts 156. Later still, in 1967, a slightly shorter version of the film was issued again (Galbraith IV: 127–128; Website *IMDb*). The need to make another edited version shows that the producer and the cinemas considered the film to be of interest, but that the audience did not respond accordingly. Fortunately, *Variety Film Reviews* published a review on the picture and, as an American journal, this journal realized that the Japanese background of SHAKA would create problems with the American audience. So it made the following comments:

> [T]here is too much stress on people being killed, dying of disease or being brutally punished. Opening sequences are tediously patterned to the extent that they become boring. The period in India's history, as depicted, had sexy episodes in the royal palaces. In one of these, the king's wife is shown making a play for the younger son. Rebuffed, she wins over the captain of the guard in order to see that this son is punished—having his eyes burned out. (*Variety Film Reviews*, 3 July 1963)

In other words, this feature contained too much sex and was too cruel for American viewers. Nonetheless, *Variety Film Reviews* wrote that the main actors, as excellent Japanese film stars, give a superb performance, while Misumi's direction is top flight.

Kojiro Hongo played the role of Prince Siddhattha, the later Buddha. *Variety Film Reviews* gives the following summary of the story of SHAKA:

> Basic plot idea has a youthful prince, Siddhattha… irked at the conditions of the common people, many of them dying from starvation and untreated disease. He also is perturbed by the old religions, and turns away in horror from some of the rites including that of human sacrifice. So one night he deserts his princess wife and goes away for six years of meditations.

> He resists demons, sensual dancing girls and semi-nude femmes to attain spiritual enlightenment, being reborn as the Buddha. He gathers many disciples, who carry on his work as word spreads of his miracles and good deeds. The miracle of bringing torrents of rain to a thirst-parched village, and later of halting a huge elephant just as he was to trample on one of his priests bring him thousands of converts. (*Variety Film Reviews*, 3 July 1963)

Unfortunately, it was impossible to see the film itself. The only information about the content of SHAKA is found in this summary, which is, moreover, a summary of the abbreviated version destined for the United States. Nonetheless, it gives the impression that the film presented the life story of the Buddha. Therefore Komatsu's qualification that SHAKA was a documentary film is probably incorrect (Komatsu: 719).

Fortunately Stuart Galbraith IV printed a photograph of one of the scenes in *The Japanese Filmography*. This image shows that the setting of the picture was more Japanese than Indian, since the statue on the picture obviously depicts a Japanese *samurai* fighter.

But this information is not enough to give a serious description of the portrayal of Buddha in this movie. Buddha is horrified by all the violence in his surroundings, he gathers many disciples and thousands of converts, preaches and performs miracles and good acts. At the same time the summary reveals that the film also made room for the mythical traits in Buddha's life story. But it is impossible to make a more profound analysis.

Seokgamoni

On 13 February 1964 a Korean Buddha film premiered called SEOKGAMONI, which is Korean for *Shakyamuni*. *Shakyamuni* is Sanskrit and literally means 'the sage of the Shakyas'. The Shakyas are the tribe in which Buddha was born. In Mahayana Buddhism *Shakyamuni* is commonly used to refer to the historical Buddha. The director was Jang Il-ho, who made more than 50 films (Website *IMDb*). The only thing known up until the present comes from a statement by Yi Hyo-in, the current director of the Korean Film Archive, that the feature belonged to the first historical drama films of Korean soil and that it is was an 'epic Ben Hur-like film' (Yi: 101). Moreover, the poster (Website *Korean Film Archive*) shows that the setting of the motion picture was more Korean than Indian.

The Little Buddha

On 1 December 1993 the next film narrating the life story of the Awakened One premiered in France. Its director, Bernardo Bertolucci (b. 1940), already had a successful career as a filmmaker behind him, starting as an assistant to Pier Paolo Pasolini when the latter shot his Accattone released in Italy in 1961. The first film Bertolucci directed himself was La Commare Secca (The Grim Reaper) of 1962. Both Accattone and La Commare Secca are about people living on the fringes of Italian society, which reflected the leftist views both Pasolini and Bertolucci cherished at the time, since this was the means through which they wished to display the problems of the people on the bottom rung of society and to give them a voice. Although Bertolucci still followed his earlier political convictions in Il Conformista (The Conformist) of 1970, in which he criticized the conformism of many Italians while the fascists were in power in Italy (Kivits and Van Loon), he chose another direction in the mid-1980s, when he directed his attention to Asia and Asian cultures. The first result was The Last Emperor (1987) about Pu Yi, the last emperor of China, who was enticed by the Japanese in 1934 to rule Manchuria for them. Again, this was also a film about a person who went too far in his conformism.

Bertolucci's interest in Buddhism already started earlier, however, when he received a copy of the *Life of Milarepa* from a friend in 1963. He even quoted from this book during the making of his Prima della Rivoluzione (Before the Revolution) in 1964 (Gerard and Kline: 209). Nonetheless, he relates that he lost his way after the bankruptcy of Marxism. He felt forsaken, but Buddhism filled the gap and gave him new inspiration (*De Telegraaf*). Bertolucci mentions three things that appealed to him in Buddhism. The first is reincarnation, since it suggests that life is more than the short period between birth and death. 'I can't accept the idea that everything we are and everything we have done is lost after our death. The thoughts we have had, the work we have done is definitely not lost' (Gerard and Kline: 214). There is another reality, *nibbana*,[8] where everyone is delivered from suffering, but in Tibetan Buddhism it is more important for many people who have reached enlightenment and therefore are qualified to attain *nibbana*, to return to the earth 'to help the others to reach the same state of peacefulness' (Gerard and Kline: 215). The earth seems to be more

[8] Bertolucci uses the term *nirvana*.

important than *nibbana*, which remains a remote goal. This reflects the incredible enjoyment of life Bertolucci saw among the Tibetans (Gerard and Kline: 215). A third appealing quality of Buddhism is the importance it attaches to the power of the mind: 'with your mind you can imagine and destroy and imagine and create' (Gerard and Kline: 220). In the meantime it is vital to realize that in Buddhism 'no movement in the universe exists without a cause. So we can find the cause of every effect in our lives and in ourselves' (Gerard and Kline: 221). His LITTLE BUDDHA discloses that all this has to be accompanied by an attitude of compassion.

It was the request of a producer who asked him to make a Buddha film that prompted him to start the production of this film. But Bertolucci did not want to make an educational biopic about the Buddha. He wanted to make a film that had to do with contemporary society. Then he remembered some news he read years earlier regarding Western children who had been 'recognized' as reincarnations of famous Tibetan *lama*s (Gerard and Kline: 210–211), Tibetan Buddhist monks. Furthermore, Bertolucci wanted the film to be accessible to children. The result is an extravaganza of more than US $35 million (*Variety Film Reviews*, 13 December 1993). Thus, THE LITTLE BUDDHA does not simply narrate Buddha's biography.

> It starts with three Tibetan monks, including their leader, *Lama* Norbu, played by the Chinese actor Ying Ruocheng, who suppose that their deceased master, *Lama* Dorje, has been reincarnated in Jesse Konrad, an American boy living in Seattle, Washington. They give Jesse a book entitled *The Little Buddha*, which is read and presented throughout the film. The monks want to take Jesse to Bhutan, but his parents are very reluctant. The sudden death of a good friend makes his father decide to go to Bhutan with Jesse. But in the meantime another boy living in Nepal is also 'recognized' as a reincarnation of *Lama* Dorje and an Indian girl is later 'recognized' to be one as well.
>
> Every time the book given to Jesse is read the story of the picture is intersected with a section representing the part read in the life story of Prince Siddhattha,[9] the later Buddha. In total, the movie includes eight of these sections. Siddhattha is played by Keanu Reaves (b. 1964). In contrast to the story of Jesse, the biography of Buddha is set in an Indian environment. Except for Reaves, all other actors here are Indians.

[9] In the film he is called Siddhartha.

Siddhattha's story starts with his mother, Queen Maya,[10] telling her husband that she had a strange dream of an elephant touching her with his trunk. Then Siddhattha is born. Standing up almost immediately, he walks around and lotus flowers spring up everywhere he places one of his feet. The boy declares that he will save humankind from suffering.

His father, King Suddhodana, organizes a great festival to announce and celebrate the birth of a successor to the throne, but on that very day the sage Asita comes to the court to foretell that Siddhattha will become a great man or someone who will save humankind from suffering. Shortly afterwards, seven days after Siddhattha's birth, Maya dies.

King Suddhodana tries to keep his son within the walls of the palace and to fill his life with the greatest possible happiness. So he has Siddhattha play and win at sports like the traditional ball game *kabadi* and has him marry the beautiful princess Yashodhara. The king seems to succeed indeed, but when the prince hears a woman singing about the beauty of her country located far away outside the palace, the desire to leave the palace stirs instantly in Siddhattha's heart. Ultimately his father gives in.

Siddhattha quits the palace in a palanquin to be welcomed by loudly cheering masses filling the streets he passes by. But suddenly he sees two old men. The prince jumps from his palanquin and walks into the city districts where he meets some sick people and at the shore of a river he sees a dead body being cremated in a huge fire. 'It was from this date, from this fire, with these people that Siddhartha learnt about suffering and discovered compassion. They were him and he was them.' Completely overwhelmed by sadness, Siddhattha returns to the palace.

There it comes to a confrontation with his father whom he reproaches for having hid all suffering from him. When the king replies that he did so out of love, the prince answers that his father's love has become a prison. Then the king tells Siddhattha that he has a son, but Siddhattha's decision to lift the curse of being born and dying again and again is irreversible.

That very night the prince commands his charioteer to saddle his horse to leave the palace and they ride away together. During a long ride they pass some ascetics and Siddhattha's charioteer tells him about their intentions and activities. The prince dismounts and cuts off his long hair, which his servant carefully gathers up. The prince then gives him his royal vestments and commands him to return to the palace. A beggar approaches Siddhattha and appeals to his charity. Siddhattha changes clothes with him and then starts his spiritual quest among the ascetics. He sits down under a large tree and five ascetics draw closer out of curiosity to sit opposite him. There is a heavy rain shower and a cobra approaches Siddhattha, but Siddhattha remains calm. The cobra moves its head up to

[10] In the film she is called Mahamaya.

keep it above Siddhattha's head to protect him against the rain. The five ascetics are astonished and decide to become his disciples.

After sitting under the tree for seven years Siddhattha hears an old musician on a boat passing by on the river speaking to his pupil: 'If you tighten the string too much it will snap, and if you leave it too slack it won't play.' Siddhattha realizes suddenly that he is on the wrong path. He stands up, takes a bath among some water buffaloes in the river. Afterwards a girl approaches him and offers him a bowl of rice. For the first time in a long time Siddhattha eats some food. His disciples are astonished and disappointed and abandon him. Siddhattha looks at the river, with the empty bowl in his hands. Then he says: 'If I can reach enlightenment may this bowl float upstream.' He puts the bowl on the surface of the water and, surprisingly, the bowl goes upstream indeed.

In the meantime, Jesse and his father arrive together with *Lama* Norbu and his fellow monks in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, to meet the other boy who is supposed to be a reincarnation of *Lama* Dorje. Later, they travel to the mansion where the girl, the third person supposed to be a reincarnation of *Lama* Dorje, lives. While the girl's mother welcomes the Tibetan monks and entertains them elaborately, the three 'reincarnations' go to the large garden surrounding the house. Later *Lama* Norbu and the others also come to the garden and he starts to read the book about Siddhattha. Suddenly, the children see Siddhattha meditating under a huge tree. In a surreal scene Mara, the lord of darkness, attempts to distract Siddhattha, first using his daughters in an attempt to seduce him. When this turns out to be unsuccessful, 'Mara conjures up a violent storm, rains fireballs down on Siddhattha, and unleashes an army of fire-throwing archers upon him' (Fisher: 46). Then his own mirror image appears before Siddhattha claiming that he is the real Siddhattha, but Siddhattha replies: 'O Lord of my own ego, you are pure illusion. You do not exist.' Siddhattha then touches the earth with his right hand and declares that the earth is his witness, upon which the mirror image turns into Mara himself and disappears. Siddhattha smiles. The three 'reincarnations' look at him and he is absorbed into a golden aura and disappears.

The three children run to *Lama* Norbu and sit at his feet. *Lama* Norbu explains:

> Siddhartha won the battle against an army of demons just through the force of his love and the great compassion he had found. And he achieved a great calm that precedes detachment from illusions. He had reached beyond himself. He was beyond joy and pain, separate from judgment, able to remember that he had been a girl, a dolphin, a tree, a monkey. He remembered his first birth and the millions after that. He could see beyond the universe. Siddhartha had seen the ultimate reality of all things. He had understood that every movement in the universe is an effect provoked by a course. He knew there was no salvation without compassion for every being. From that moment on Siddhartha was called the Buddha, the Awakened One.

> Siddhattha has returned in the meantime and is sitting under the tree again. After Norbu has finished speaking the camera tilts upwards from Buddha to the crown of the tree.
>
> The next shot focuses on a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Bhutan. There it is discovered that *Lama* Dorje has reincarnated in all three children, since he separated his body, speech and mind, each of which been reincarnated in a separate child. Then *Lama* Norbu dies And the monks start to recite a text that is always read when someone has passed away. Shortly afterwards *Lama* Norbu appears to the children—Bertolucci himself speaks about *Lama* Norbu's ghost (Gerard and Kline: 213)—and says: 'The most important thing of all is to feel compassion for all beings, to give of oneself and above all to pass on knowledge like the Buddha.' He then explains to them that the monks recite the Heart Sutra—a text dating from the 4th century CE (Harvey: 95)—and chant: 'Form is empty; emptiness is form. No eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. No colour, sound, smell, taste, touch, existing things.' Later when Jesse meets his father again, he continues the series and says to his father: 'No Jesse, no *lama*, no you, no death and no fear.' The circle is complete. His father learns that it is not necessary to be afraid because his friend has died.
>
> All three children have received some ashes of *Lama* Norbu's cremated body. When they are back home, each returns the ashes to a certain element. The Nepalese boy elevates it by three balloons to throw it into the air. The girl climbs into the tree under which she saw Siddhattha meditating to throw it onto the earth. Jesse puts it in a rice bowl, which resembles the one used by Siddhattha earlier in the picture. He then sets the bowl afloat on the sea during a boat trip near Seattle. His mother is pregnant. The message is clear: Will the baby in her womb become another reincarnation of *Lama* Norbu? Meanwhile the bowl with his ashes floats away.

Although Bertolucci dared to sin against one of the basic rules of filmmaking, namely by omitting a fundamental conflict in his feature that would hold the audience's interest (*De Telegraaf*), he succeeded 'due to its unusual subject, exotic settings, filmmaking skill and intrigue as to where it might all be leading' (*Variety Film Reviews*, 13 December 1993). There is a great difference in the picture between the blues and greys of the images of Seattle and the vibrant, emotional colour of the Eastern settings. When Jesse's father decides to go to Bhutan the blues and greys become green and, in the last sequence of the picture, which also occurs in Seattle, there is normal daylight. The message is apparently that life in Western society is boring and void of vitality, whereas life is real and vivid in the East. But life in the West will become real and vivid as well when people start to follow the path of the Buddha. All together, this gives the film the character of a fairy tale. Bertolucci said that he wished to create a feature for children and although most

children will not understand everything, such as, for example, *Lama* Norbu's explanation about Buddha (see above), many of them will enjoy the movie because of its great atmosphere, which is reinforced in particular by the shots of the Tibetan settings.

Another quality of the film that reinforces its fanciful character is its many surrealistic events. The trees bow down to help Maya give birth to her son and lotus flowers spring out of the footsteps of the walking baby. Other examples are the scene of Mara before the meditating Siddhattha and all events taking place in it, as well as the appearance of the dead *Lama* Norbu to teach the children the essence of the Heart Sutra and to reveal to them that ultimately everything is empty. It is important to realize, however, that all these surreal events always take place in the sections of the picture occurring in the East. In other words, the Eastern world includes mysterious dimensions that seem to be absent from Seattle, in the Western world.

The Little Buddha was received sympathetically but was not regarded as one of Bertolucci's greatest features. His previous film, The Last Emperor, is generally considered to be of far higher quality. Nonetheless, there was much appreciation and many reviewers were of the opinion that to the common American, who is more familiar with Christianity, it offered a good introduction to Buddhism. They also saw it as a good film for children older than 10 years (Reviews on website *Rotten Tomatoes*; Lane; Mooij; *De Telegraaf*).[11] A reviewer in the Netherlands called it Bertolucci's Christmas message, since it was released three weeks before Christmas (*Filmkrant* 140 (December 1993)).

The comments of the Buddhists themselves are, of course, also important. Unfortunately, however, only one review by a Buddhist could be found, i.e. that by Zen master Seung San, who commented on 24 June 1994 that

[11] Website *Rotten Tomatoes* includes reviews by Marjorie Baumgarten, *The Austin Chronicle*, 1994), Chris Hicks (*Deseret News*, 1994), Steven Rhodes (*Internet Reviews*, 1995), Dennis Schwartz (*Ozus' World Movie Reviews*, 2004), Wally Hammond (*Time Out Film Guide*), Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (*Spirituality and Practice*), *TV Guide's Movie Guide*. Anthony Lane was the author of the review on the website *The New Yorker*. These reviewers mentioned in this note are Americans, whereas Thessa Mooij and the reviewer of *De Telegraaf* are Dutch. These reviews are too few of course for a real analysis of the reception of The Little Buddha. Nonetheless, they give some indication—in particular for the United States and Western Europe.

> the first half of this movie was very good, and had good teaching. The beginning of the movie showed the Buddha as a young prince, how he was struck by the suffering of the world.… But the second half of the movie was not as clear. The Buddha left home, and never went back to his family.… This movie should show what happened to this boy that he studied hard, became a great person, and helped many beings.… The movie would have been complete if it showed them practicing hard, getting enlightenment, and helping other people. But why finish this movie before that? If you finish the movie before that, it does not connect to the Buddha's life. It does not show Buddhism is about teaching other people today. So it's not complete—not clear teaching. (Website *Dharmaflix*)

Miramax issued a so-called *Miramax Classic* DVD of the picture later, so that it could be used in teaching programmes at schools and universities (Website *Teach with Movies*). The feature is also shown in courses on Buddhism at some universities.[12] The probable reason for this is that it gives a short survey of Buddha's life up until his enlightenment while simultaneously giving the audience the opportunity to become acquainted with the atmosphere of Tibetan Buddhism, which is important since it has become one of the most common varieties of this religion in the West.

The portrayal Bertolucci presents of Buddhism is also very interesting. He shows the life of the Buddha but without the more than 40 years in which he travelled around to teach his doctrine while gathering a community of monks and nuns. Buddha's biopic ends with his enlightenment, which is explained as his triumph over illusion. Furthermore, Bertolucci shows the audience the Tibetan variant of Buddhism, the appearance of which is more exotic than most other varieties of this religion. In this way Bertolucci shows the core story in one of the most fabulous contexts Buddhism can provide.

Buddha (1995)

In 1995 Padmalaya Telefilms Limited, located in Hyderabad, the capital of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, released the next great Buddha film. The name of the firm reveals that its main objective is to produce television films and not films for the big screen. It was incorporated in 1991 as Rajiv Ratna Cine Enterprises, but changed its name in 1995 into Padmalaya Telefilms Limited. G. Adi Sheshagiri Rao is the boss in

[12] THE LITTLE BUDDHA has been used already for several years in courses on Buddhism at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

this company, which possesses both a film studio and a library including more than 200 Telugu films. The firm claims to have released two serials, JAY VEER HANUMAN and BUDDHA, the former of which seems to have been most successful, since it premiered on India's national broadcasting company, *Doordarshan National*, for 100 weeks. BUDDHA premiered on *Sony TV* only for 26 weeks (Website *Padmalaya Telefilms Ltd.*).[13]

BUDDHA is a serial consisting of 27 episodes recorded on 5 DVDs. Each episode lasts about 20 minutes, although some are shorter, around 6 or 10 minutes. The complete serial lasts 8 hours and 13 minutes.

G. Adi Sheshagiri Rao is also the producer of this picture, whereas P.C. Reddy acted as director. Gopi K. Radha was responsible for the music. The most important actor in the film is Arun Govind, who played Rama in Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN. This time he plays the role of Buddha.

> The serial starts with the life of Sumedha.[14] Buddhist tradition holds that Buddha 'spent many lives as a human, animal and god, building up the moral and spiritual perfections necessary for Buddhahood. These lives are described in what is known as the *Jataka* stories' (Harvey: 15). In his previous life Buddha was born as Sumedha.
>
> As Sumedha, he grows up in a rich Brahman family, where he receives an orthodox Hindu education, including training in the ashram of a Hindu *guru*. After his parents die, he opens the birdcages, gives his father's cows to the male guests and his mother's jewels to the female guests. He turns his parents' mansion into a hostel for travellers passing by, since he himself wishes to become an ascetic. After some time some men join him as his disciples. Then Sumedha meets the previous Buddha, Dipankara, who shows Sumedha the woman who will become his wife in his next life and when Sumedha himself will become a Buddha. When Sumedha meets a blind man, he proposes that they both undergo an operation in which the blind man will receive one of his eyes so that he will no longer be blind. This takes place. When Sumedha finally dies and goes to the Tushita heaven (literally: the abode of delight), he finds life there very boring. He is eager to be born again as a son of the then

[13] Unfortunately it was impossible to check this information with Door Darshan National. An ominous sign is that none of the films are included in the IMDb database (Website *IMDb*). This is why we have used the word 'seems' here.

[14] The film is in Hindi. So he is, in fact, called Sumedh. For the same reason Dipankara is called Dipankar, Yashodhara Yashodhra, Siddhattha Siddharth, Suddhodana Suddhodan, and Devadatta Devdutt. Because of the present author's wish to maintain uniformity in this chapter in spelling regarding the names, the spelling used in BUDDHA is not followed.

ruling king Suddhodana, who is well known for his justice. Nonetheless, he has a problem because Suddhodana's wife, Maya, has still not given him a heir and successor. The king decides to organize a festival and to invite Queen Maya's[15] sister, Pajapati, who is visiting the court for the first time. She remains there and later both Maya and Pajapati pray to the gods for a heir and successor for the king. Maya promises to keep eight vows, which means that she will behave properly, abstain from wine and not eat too much food.

The second DVD starts with a *puja* (Hindu worship) for the goddess Durga. A voice announces the birth of a *Mahatma* (great soul). The queen is lying in bed with her husband afterwards and tells him about her dream in which a certain person, Sumedha, enters her body in the form of a white elephant. The king consults the astrologers and they also announce the birth of a son.

On her way to her parents, Maya is overcome by labour pain and gets down from her couch. The trees bow to help her as she gives birth to a son behind a curtain. Her son is laid down in a hammock and a Shivaite sage passes by and announces that a saviour is born. The gods strew flowers on the child from heaven. About the same time a foal is born as well as two boys and a girl. The foal will later become the horse of the newborn prince, while one of the boys will become the prince's charioteer, and the other boy is Kala Udai, the son of one of the ministers. The girl is Yashodhara, the future wife of the prince. Someone plants a small tree that will later grow into the *bodhi* tree, the tree under which the prince will achieve enlightenment.

When Maya returns to the palace, she gives her newborn son to her sister Pajapati. Maya becomes ill. Her sister performs the rituals of worship for Durga, but Mara, a demon god, visits Maya telling her that she will die. He comforts her by saying that only her body will pass away, while her soul will accompany her son. Suddenly her son starts to speak, telling her to take refuge with the Buddha, the *dharma* (Buddha's teachings) and the *sanga* (the Buddhist order). The king asks the priest and a physician for help, but in vain. The name-giving ceremony is quickly performed for the prince, whereby he receives the name Siddhattha. Maya dies shortly after.

Her sister, Pajapati, takes care of Siddhattha. Miraculously, her 'virgin breasts' start to produce milk. It becomes obvious that the baby is very fond of Pajapati, so the king decides to marry her. Although Pajapati's mother is against this marriage, since she believes that the king caused the death of Maya, her other daughter, her father gives his approval. During the marriage ceremony the sage Asita predicts that Siddhattha will bring the people great happiness.

[15] In the film she is called Mahamaya.

Soon Pajapati herself has two children, a son, Devadatta, and a daughter, Nanda. Unfortunately, Devadatta is very jealous of Siddhattha, often badgering him, but Siddhattha always asks that his brother be forgiven. During the festival of the plough Siddhattha is meditating even though he is still a boy. A radiant light shines around him and his plough changes into gold. Those seeing this are very surprised and one man proposes that they worship him with an offering ceremony. Siddhattha then awakens from his meditation and asks what is happening.

Another time Siddhattha refuses to bring offerings to a *linga*, an obtuse pillar or phallic symbol[16] devoted to the god Shiva, because Siddhattha himself is 'the Preserver of Life', which is a title of the god Vishnu. His stepmother orders him to forget this, but Siddhattha replies that it is impossible since the heavenly gods themselves come to worship him. Indeed, the celestial gods, including Brahma, Yama, Vayu, Agni and Mara, come and strew flowers on the floor before his feet before immediately disappearing. Now Pajapati also pays homage to Siddhattha. The priest does not understand what is happening, since only Pajapati and Siddhattha saw the gods worshipping Siddhattha.

The third DVD starts with the time Siddhattha is just about to depart to a *guru* to continue his training there. Devadatta exclaims that he wishes to accompany Siddhattha. When they are in the ashram, Siddhattha turns out to know all scripts, not only those of the Indian languages, but also those in the Chinese, Japanese and Roman languages. During this period Devadatta is constantly troublesome and intractable. The story about the goose comes up again and once more the prime minister interferes to assign the goose to Siddhattha.

Asita visits the court and advises the king not to let him be confronted too much with suffering. Siddhattha needs a luxurious life. Devadatta is often drunk and is violent at one time towards two female dancers. Devadatta's misbehaviour causes division between the king who wishes to interfere and his ministers, in particular Sahadeva, who defends Devadatta by saying that Siddhattha neglects state affairs. Devadatta then promises Sahadeva that he will be appointed prime minister if Devadatta becomes king. Sahadeva promises Devadatta that he will succeed. At that time Siddhattha is drunk as well. Two women support him while he walks through the palace. Channa, his charioteer and best friend, sends the women away and reveals to Siddhattha that, at Devadatta's initiative, the ministers are planning a martial arts match in the court arena. Devadatta expects to win. Yashodhara's parents are also informed about the match and her father decides to visit the spectacle, accompanied by his daughter. Siddhattha wins all the events of the match: fighting without weapons, fighting with weapons, archery as well as taming a wild horse. Yashodhara

[16] Many Hindus fiercely deny that the *linga* is a phallic symbol.

falls in love with Siddhattha. Everyone is proud of him, although the king is worried, since he saw that some fighters actually did want to kill his eldest son. He says this to Pajapati who exclaims that her son brings her bad luck. Yashodhara is completely in love. She lies in bed and dreams of a romantic meeting with Siddhattha in which they both sing about their feelings of love. She later plays with her cousin Gautami and tells her about her dreams and how beautiful Siddhattha is. She tells her other friends later about her love.

In the palace Siddhattha ponders the announcement of his father that he will have him get married, telling Channa that he wishes to remain free. Channa then informs him that he knows a girl who will do what he says and will give him room. When Siddhattha becomes curious, Channa says that she is Yashodhara, the daughter of the merchant Dandhapani. Channa arranges that he and Siddhattha perform worship for a *linga*, while Yashodhara and Gautami are also at this temple to worship. After Channa introduces them to each other Siddhattha and Yashodhara look at each other intensely. Then Channa advises him to continue with the ceremony.

The king and the queen decide that a ceremony called 'marriage by choice' will be held and a priest is asked to determine an auspicious day. Siddhattha protests that God creates all days, so they are all auspicious. Although the priest declares that Siddhattha spoke wisely, the king emphasizes that they ought to act according to the ancient traditions. The ceremony is organized and many princesses show up, but in the end Siddhattha chooses Yashodhara. Devadatta then tries to persuade Dandhapani that he must decline the proposal of the marriage of his daughter to Siddhattha, because Siddhattha is not really in love. Yashodhara interferes, however, and Devadatta then goes to the other princesses and feels them up. Dandhapani sees what is happening and interferes.

Siddhattha and Yashodhara marry in accordance with the traditions of orthodox Hinduism and are very happy. When Yashodhara kneels down at the prince's feet, he lifts her up and says that her place is not at his feet: she is in his heart. Six celestial gods even pronounce a blessing over their marriage, but Mara asks them how the prince can become a Buddha, if he experiences only happiness in his life. He announces that he will test Siddhattha. That night Siddhattha dreams and says: 'I am coming, I am coming.' Yashodhara tries to awake him, but Siddhattha continues his dreaming and says: 'I can hear your pleas. I am coming to wipe your tears.'

The fourth DVD start with a dialogue in which Yashodhara reveals to her mother-in-law that Siddhattha often leaves her at night so he can think on the veranda or dreams of people crying for help, and that he never touches her. The queen informs the king about his son's behaviour. Although Siddhattha sees his wife's excellence, he is busy thinking almost every night. The king decides to hold an elaborate celebration for Siddhattha's

30th birthday. Yashodhara later tells Siddhattha, who is seated in a chair, again pondering, that she is pregnant. They embrace and Suddhodana thinks that Siddhattha's depression will disappear now. The heavenly gods decide, however, that the time has come to show the prince what suffering is. Shortly afterwards Siddhattha asks the king for permission to leave the palace. After Yashodhara requests that Siddhattha's wish be fulfilled, Suddhodana gives permission. Without Siddhattha's knowing, however, the king orders Kala Udai, the son of one of the ministers, to see to it that the people of Kapilavatthu, the capital of the kingdom, decorate their houses and that the prince will not be confronted with sick or old people.

The prince rides out in a beautiful coach with Channa as his charioteer. The people of the city cheer Siddhattha loudly. Meanwhile, the prince expresses his astonishment to Channa that there is so little difference between life inside the palace and outside the court. Then, however, Mara descends to the street where Siddhattha is riding in the form of an old man. The prince is bewildered and asks Channa to explain this. Channa explains that youth passes and bodies change and hair becomes white. Horrified, the prince orders Channa to return to the palace. From then on Siddhattha leaves Yashodhara every night and sits on the veranda pondering what he experienced. Yashodhara becomes depressed. The prince wishes to make a second tour and later a third and a fourth one. During the second tour he sees a very sick beggar and during his third a dead body being carried away by four other people. In the meantime Siddhattha becomes increasingly depressed, losing interest in his wife who desperately tries to gain his attention. When his son is born, he is scarcely interested. The ministers, and Kala Udai in particular, propose diverting the prince's thoughts with a show by beautiful dancers, but Siddhattha sends them away. One of them does her utmost again later but has a terrible cough. The prince asks her what the matter is and she tells him that her sister had died of this disease two years ago. Siddhattha tells her to rest; he gives her a golden bracelet and sends her home.

The heavenly gods convene again and during his fourth tour Siddhattha meets a wandering ascetic, Mara incarnated as one of Siddhattha's old friends who had become an ascetic. When Siddhattha asks him how he can be so calm and happy and if he is not afraid of old age and death, the man answers that he has no fear and that as long as one has worldly desires he will never attain happiness. Full of astonishment, Siddhattha recognizes the truth of his words and decides to become an ascetic as well. Afterwards, he frequently meditates on the bank of a river. The celestial gods decide to interfere again. One by one they appear as a person who gives the prince the required instruments for becoming an ascetic. One of them advises him to become an ascetic and hangs a garland around his neck. Then the god changes into a hairdresser and, saying that God has sent him, gives him a knife to cut his hair.

Although a princess tries to seduce Siddhattha, he leaves the palace that night. Siddhattha goes one more time to the bed where his wife and son are sleeping. He looks intensely at them but then leaves to go to Channa. Channa saddles Siddhattha's horse and Siddhattha talks softly to the horse and mounts it. Together, he and Channa, who is walking, go to the gates of the palace. Everyone is sleeping. The heavenly gods open the gates and Siddhattha and Channa pass through the gates and leave the court. After a long ride through the forest, Siddhattha takes leave of the horse and orders Channa to bring it back to the palace. Siddhattha takes off his royal vestments, gives them to Channa, and then leaves. Mara sees everything and changes into a hunter to meet Siddhattha. Siddhattha greets him and proposes that they exchange clothes. Siddhattha subsequently continues on his journey dressed as a hunter. Mara is content and disappears. In the meantime Channa arrives at the palace. The king, the queen and Yashodhara are relieved when they hear that Siddhattha is safe, but at the same time full of questions about why Siddhattha left.

The fifth and last DVD starts with Channa's story that the prince decided to cut the bonds of blood and left the palace out of love. The king says: 'We should pray for the success of Siddhattha in achieving his goal. The day that he becomes a Buddha, that day will be a great day for us. We should bless him.' Subsequently, the queen orders Channa to throw Siddhattha's royal vestments into the Pushkara River.

Meanwhile, Mara follows Siddhattha, whose hair has now been cut differently, in line with some Buddha images.[17] Mara asks why he would want to leave his wealthy life in a palace surrounded by beautiful women. Siddhattha asks Mara in turn if he can see that he will not become sick or old or die. Mara is silent and Siddhattha then sends him away. After a long walk he arrives at a cave where *guru* Brahma Lara Karma teaches his spiritual lessons to his disciples. The *guru* tells Siddhattha to bathe in the Ganges, which Siddhattha does and sings an ode to the Ganges and to the Vindhya mountains. Then he returns to the *guru* who teaches him various *yoga* postures. Siddhattha proves that he is able to perform all of them except for the last. Then he leaves the *guru*.

He goes to two female *guru*s, Padma and Shakti, who teach him to float above the ground and to see what is happening in the palace in Kapilavatthu. Subsequently, they send him to their brother, Revadatta, who teaches him to control his breathing and meditation on the holy OM syllable. He then teaches him all 108 Upanishads. Siddhattha turns out to be a very quick study, learning everything in the twinkling of an eye. Then Revadatta sends him to Rajat to learn the powers of occultism. Rajat tests Siddhattha before allowing him to become his pupil. He then teaches

[17] Thus his hair is not shaved!

him all kinds of magic tricks and takes Siddhattha to Rajavardatta, who says that he can only pass on a gift to Siddhattha: he gives him a bowl to go begging. Siddhattha goes to Rajagaha, the capital of Magadha, the kingdom of King Bimbisara. The king recognizes Siddhattha when he begs at the kitchen door of his palace and orders his servant to follow him. The servant finds the begging ascetic in a cave and Siddhattha promises to return to the capital when he begs again. When the servant tells the king that the ascetic is indeed Siddhattha, the king and his servants immediately visit Siddhattha in his cave, inviting Siddhattha to stay in his palace, but Siddhattha declines the invitation. He promises to come after he has attained enlightenment.

In Kapilavatthu Minister Sahadeva advises Devadatta to marry Yashodhara, since her son Rahula is growing up. Devadatta attempts to seduce Yashodhara but does so in such a clumsy and violent way that Yashodhara feels intimidated. She sends him away and complains to the queen. Meanwhile, the servants of the king report that they were unable to find Siddhattha and the ministers themselves and Channa are sent off to find him. They do find him ultimately, but Siddhattha sends them back saying that they never must return. It is a great temptation for him.

Siddhattha later walks along the river performing various *yoga* exercises. Five ascetics are very impressed and become his disciples. Siddhattha now becomes very strict and eats very little. In the meantime two of Devadatta's servants discover him. They conclude that he is unconscious and report Devadatta that he is dying. Devadatta happily orders them to tell the king that Siddhattha is dead, but Suddhodana is unwilling to believe them, since the sage Asita prophesied that Siddhattha would become a great man. He sends them away.

The god Nagadeva incites to Siddhattha to eat, since he has to stay alive, otherwise he will not attain enlightenment. Siddhattha starts to eat and his disciples decide to leave him. One of them says: 'A man who cannot control his hunger, how can he find the path of salvation?'

A woman called Sujata gives Siddhattha food, believing him to be a tree god who can give her a son. Her servant had told her about the radiance around the tree that his presence caused. The son is born and the mistress thankfully tells her servant that from now on she is no longer her servant but an equal.

Siddhattha stands on the bank of the river, letting his bowl float in the water and praying to the river that the bowl will float upstream against the current if he is to attain enlightenment that very same day. The bowl does floats upwards indeed and now Siddhattha believes that he will achieve enlightenment that very day. He starts to meditate under the tree and a man approaches him and asks him questions. The representation of this sequence suggests that what is shown is, in fact, an internal dialogue. The man asks about having a *guru*, the content of being a Brahman, the

dharma or morality, belief, truth and deliverance. Siddhattha answers that neither one's birth, wearing a sacred thread nor knowing the sacred scriptures by heart without knowing their meaning makes one a Brahman. 'A Brahman is someone who practices about the knowledge of the whole world … who knows about the whole creation … who supports the religion' (*dharma*) (BUDDHA, DVD 5). Deliverance means that 'there will be no longings, cravings, pride, enmity, untruth, hatred and selfishness' (BUDDHA, DVD 5). After a wish that the Almighty will help him to reach his goal the man leaves him. Siddhattha continues his meditation for a long time. A peacock and some doves approach him.

Suddenly the god Mara appears. He calls his two daughters and asks them where his armies are, since Siddhattha

> has reached the final stage of meditation … I have to interrupt his penance at any cost or he will succeed in achieving truth and salvation … After his enlightenment he will spread his message in every corner of the world. He will guide everyone to follow non-violence, love and sacrifice … We reside in anger, lust, greed and envy. (BUDDHA, DVD 5)

In other words, the realm of Mara, the kingdom of evil, will come to its end if Siddhattha attains enlightenment. His daughters promise to help him.

Mara approaches Siddhattha and tries to disrupt his meditation by shooting arrows at him, by having a beautiful female dancer perform a dance in front of him and by causing heavy rain showers. But with this last attempt a cobra lifts his head over Siddhattha's head to protect him from the rain. When the rain stops, the cobra disappears. Mara then sends a dancing couple followed by five monkeys threatening him with tridents, and five men in orange overalls with swords who are replaced by four female dancers dancing with a man. Siddhattha remains immovable. Subsequently, Mara tries to catch Siddhattha's attention by visions of his dying father, and of his wife and son appealing to him, but Siddhattha answers that deliverance can only be attained by renouncing worldly bonds, so the bonds of love cannot stop him. Then Mara stands in front of him and says that Kapilavatthu is being attacked by enemies and the royal family is in danger. But Siddhattha explains that when one finds truth and ultimate knowledge, feelings of enmity will disappear on their own. Mara admits his defeat, kneeling down in front of Siddhattha and strews flowers on his head and then disappears.

Siddhattha subsequently sees the moments of reflection in his life in which he was incited to make new steps in his spiritual development, his moments of dissatisfaction, and the role the gods and Mara played in them. Then he is confronted with the highlights of his discipleship. He sees the universe then, first the galaxies, then the solar system, the earth, beautiful images of a Buddha, and finally a prism. While the camera shows Siddhattha meditating under his tree the voice-over explains that the time has come that he understand that

> [a]ll the things on earth are momentary. What has materialized has to burn off. Nothing has definite form. The molecule determines the shape of things. Even molecule is momentary. Therefore even this is a form of sorrow. Everything is naught. Nothing can be termed true or fake. Only true knowledge is ultimate truth. My mind's queries are being answered. All doubts are being cleared. I feel at peace, and complete! With the light of knowledge, intelligence is seeing the truth. Ego has been conquered in totality. Now I am the blessed one, the enlightened one. I have found the way to come out of the cycle of the life and death. (BUDDHA, DVD 5)

> At that moment he becomes the Enlightened One, a Buddha. The sun rises and festive music is heard. There are images of dancing girls passing by, alternating with the images of a still meditating Buddha, while a peacock and some doves are walking close by. A song is sung called 'The cool shade of the *bodhi* tree eliminated ignorance….' The images of the dancing girls return, still alternating with others of a meditating Buddha. These images of the girls are later replaced by flashbacks of his life. When the song stops, the films ends with the same image of the meditating Buddha.

Unfortunately it is impossible to obtain information about the reception of the movie. It seems that it was broadcast only by Sony Television. Furthermore, DVDs of the picture were sold in shops in video and DVD format, even in the Netherlands. The film was probably not seen by very many people.

The filming is often of poor quality. The camera serves only to present the narrative. There are neither beautiful close-ups nor shots of beautiful landscapes. One can notice sometimes that painted sets are used for the scenes in the open air. A panoramic view of Kapilavatthu was obviously painted. At the same time, the images remind one of the portraits and scenes of traditional Indian painting. In romantic scenes the moon is clearly visible. Furthermore, the music and movements recall traditional Indian theatre. The film, which lasts more than eight hours, contains only four songs, which is very few in comparison with Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN and with what is considered to be common in Indian film (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 155).

Tathagata Buddha

On 15 February 2008 a new Buddha film was released in Hyderabad, India. The Telugu title of the film was TATHAGATA BUDDHA and its English title was THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GAUTAMA BUDDHA. The director of the film is K. Raja Sekhar, who based his feature on the book

Gautam Buddha written by a Hindu *guru*, the filmmaker's father Kandukuri Sivananda Murthy (b. 1928) (*The Hindu*, 16 February 2008).

Unfortunately, we could not obtain a DVD of the picture until shortly before the completion of this book. It was, moreover, a Hindi copy, which made it very difficult to analyze it, since the present author's knowledge of Hindi is insufficient for a profound analysis and for a good investigation of how the filmmaker used the sources he mentioned in the film. Nor was there any time to consult an expert in Hindi. Nonetheless, it was possible to make some observations. The sources mentioned in the film are the Buddhacarita of Ashvagosha, about which more will be said in section 2.2, the Avadanakalpalata, a beautiful text including 108 legends composed by Kshemendra in the middle of the 11th century (Bareau: 135), and the Buddhacariya of Sanskrithyayana. It is possible that the producer referred to the traveling Buddhist monk Rahul Sanskrityayana (1893–1963) (Website *Wikimapia* and Website of the English *Wikipedia*), but it was, unfortunately, impossible to find out whether this monk actually did write a text with this title.

The film lasts 127 minutes and includes 10 songs, thus following the Bollywood model.

> It relates the whole story of Buddha's life from his birth until his *parinibbana*, his death and entrance into *nibbana*. After his birth and the death of his mother, Prince Siddhattha grows up in solitude, educated by his father, King Suddhodana, and his stepmother, Queen Pajapati. He has no brothers or sisters. It becomes clear that Siddhattha wishes to devote his life to his search to deliverance (*mukti*), but his father does not approve. Therefore, five young women are invited to the palace and presented to the prince. He chooses to marry the fifth, Yashodhara but right from the beginning shows almost no interest in her sexually. At night he constantly stands at the window looking outside. A son, Rahula, is born, but Siddhattha nonetheless decides to leave the palace and to start living as a wandering ascetic. On one of his journeys he is seen by King Bimbisara of Magadha who visits him, but Siddhattha sends him away. Siddhattha also shakes his head in disapproval when he sees four ascetics preparing to sacrifice a goat. Siddhattha acquires five disciples and they live together austerely until Siddhattha suddenly takes food from a passing woman. His disciples abandon him. Now the prince begins a long meditation. Mara appears in a golden mask, but Siddhatta calls the earth to be his witness and the golden mask disappears. Siddhattha sees his previous lives and subsequently gains insight into the universe. Then a lotus irradiating a splendid light appears in his chest. Now Siddhattha emanates light: he experiences his enlightenment. He is now a Buddha, the Awakened One. At this moment his wife Yashodhara stands near the empty bed of her husband. She speaks to him in her mind and Siddhattha answers.

The next sequence shows the Enlightened One going to look for his former disciples. He finds them and gives his first sermon. He then goes to King Bimbisara in Rajagaha who is glad to meet Buddha and offers him the Veluvana park. Two Brahmans come and join his group of disciples. Buddha now goes to Kapilavatthu, the capital of his father's kingdom. The king is angry and Yashodhara is very sad. After various talks with his son Rahula wants to enter the order.

The Enlightened One and Rahula return to Kapilavatthu later. King Suddhodana is very ill and dies. Buddha is present at the time and closes his father's eyes. All the women cry, including Yashodhara and Buddha's stepmother Queen Pajapati.

On his walks through the country the Awakened One makes peace between two tribes threatening each other with swords because of a passionate dispute about the distribution of water. It starts to rain after Buddha's wise judgement. Then he meets the rich merchant Anathapindika who lives in the city of Savatthi. He gives Buddha and his monks another park, the Jetavana Park, which he pays with a huge amount of golden coins that cover the whole surface of the park. Subsequently a famous courtesan, Ambapali, approaches him with two servants. The next sequence shows that she had also had contact with King Bimbisara before. The people surrounding the Enlightened One warn him, but Buddha gladly accepts her gift of milk.

Subsequently Devadatta appears. He starts to lecture the Buddha, but Buddha shakes his head and leaves, followed by his monks. The next scene shows how King Bimbisara and his son Prince Ajatasattu climb Vulture's Peak near Rajagaha to pay homage to the Enlightened One who resides at the summit. Suddenly, the prince tells his father that he has to go to Devadatta. He abandons his father and Bimbisara has to show his reverence to the Buddha by himself. In the following sequence we see how Devadatta incites Prince Ajatasattu to stand up to his father. In the meantime, Buddha's disciple Ananda asks the Enlightened One to allow his stepmother, Queen Pajapati, and his wife, Yashodhara, to enter the order as well. Buddha gives in in the end. The next sequence shows us a dialogue between the Awakened One and Ajatasattu. Buddha advises him not to associate with Devadatta.

Suddenly an axe is thrown and lands right next to Buddha. The axe was thrown by a man called Angulimala (Chain of Fingers) who points to the chain of fingers around his neck. Each finger belongs to someone he has killed. He threatens the Awakened One, but Buddha remains calm. After a long discussion, he asks to be admitted to the order. Buddha accepts him, but King Pasenadi of Kosala asks the Enlightened One if Angulimala should not be punished. After another discussion, the king understands that the order is not meant to be a refuge for criminals. It is important that the Awakened One gives instruction in all these scenes in

> the second part of the film. Apparently, that was his main activity after his enlightenment.
>
> Then the journey to Kusinara follows. Buddha has grown old and needs to be supported by Ananda. In Kusinara Buddha dies and enters *nibbana*.

The quality of the film is poor. The environment and the staging is very similar to BUDDHA, but the actors' performance is inferior to that of the actors in BUDDHA. A big difference is that the gods are absent in this feature. Buddha is characterized first and foremost as a historical figure who found enlightenment and taught great wisdom.

Unfortunately, the present author was not able to analyze the teachings presented in this picture. It is very probable that TATHAGATA BUDDHA gives a Hindu interpretation of Buddha. Murthy, the author of the book on which the film is based, is an able scholar who gained his doctorate in the Hindu *dharma* and teaches courses on it (Website of the English *Wikipedia*). Nonetheless, TATHAGATA BUDDHA is a special film since it the only feature that pays much attention to Buddha's life after his enlightenment.

Documentary Films

Although the present study focuses only on features and not on documentary films, two documentaries deserve some attention, since they reached a considerable audience.

The celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's death and entrance into *nibbana* stimulated the Indian government to order the Mumbai-based film company Bimal Roy Productions to produce the first picture entitled GOTAMA THE BUDDHA in 1957. The result is a beautiful black-and-white picture lasting 84 minutes. Hrshikesh Mukerjee (1922–2006) was the editor and Rajbans Khanna the director (Films Division: 69). That same year the documentary was cited in Cannes for its 'exceptional moral and artistic beauty' (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 204). A voice-over narrates the life story of this 'teacher of compassion…whose teachings have filled the earth as waters the sea'. In the meantime, beautiful images of various Indian landscapes, archaeological sites, reliefs, statues and paintings related to Buddha's life story are shown. The narration is alternated with the sound of short fragments of Indian music. Unlike the three first features, GOTAMA THE BUDDHA continues the history of his life after he has attained enlightenment up to his death in Kusinara. Buddha is portrayed as a 'teacher of compassion' who, after persevering in the quest, found the

truth that made an end to all craving. At the same time he opposed the slaughter of animals to be sacrificed to the gods, chose the side of the poor by living the life of a mendicant monk and inspired rulers and common people to live a morally sensible life.

The other documentary is a colour picture called La Vie de Bouddha. The picture, which lasts 90 minutes and was made by the Frenchman Martin Meissonnier, was released in 2001. Just like the other documentary film, it also narrates Buddha's life from his birth to his death. This time it is not a voice-over but Nepalese storytellers and Buddhist monks from various countries who relate his life story. Meanwhile, the audience sees scenes of events similar to those taking place in the narrative as well as views of the places where Buddha was during his lifetime, whereas a Buddhist monk sometimes plays the role of Buddha, as, for example when he sat under the *bodhi* tree. A number of scholars give explanations about the backgrounds of the archaeological sites and the historical situation in Buddha's time. Buddhist monks and scholars narrate what the Awakened One experienced during his enlightenment: complete freedom from all suffering, an experience of non-fear, which is the foundation of all happiness. The most prominent among these experts is the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926), who explains the fundamentals of Buddha's doctrine, including the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. One of the scholars, moreover, emphasizes the influence of the Jains on Buddha's views.

1.3. *Analysis*

Although the feature films depicting the life of the Enlightened One show some similarity, there are also some differences. The Light of Asia, for example, is a silent film, while the other three are sound. Another difference is their narration mode. All four motion pictures follow the classical narration mode with a character-centred causality, unity of time and space and an omnipresent and omniscient narrator. The classical narration mode, moreover, focuses on the cognitive perception of the spectators. Nonetheless, The Little Buddha has a slightly different structure, for Bertolucci's picture intertwines two narrations. Bertolucci is certainly a filmmaker who is open to renewal and experiments, but in this movie he followed tradition.

Of course, all four movies attempted to evoke emotion. The Light of Asia tried to do so by accommodating the story of Buddha and Gopa to the structure of a love story. The filmmaker thus hoped to

attract the attention of the greatest possible number of spectators. After Siddhattha's departure from the palace and the violent behaviour by Devadatta, Gopa left the palace as well, searching desperately for her princely husband. Although Indian literature includes love stories as well, the way the structure is used in this picture is predominantly Western, since in Indian literature the fact that Buddha was an ascetic would certainly have received more consideration. And the melody of popular Christian hymn 'Jesus, Still Lead On' is played when Gautama sees six men carrying a dead body. Both the love-story structure and the use of Christian music reveal that the filmmaker wished to attract Western spectators primarily, which is confirmed by the circumstance that the movie ran in India for two weeks only, whereas it ran for ten months in London.

It is the same with THE LITTLE BUDDHA. Much of the music is Western, although Tibetan Buddhist sounds and music are heard as well. However, they strengthen the exotic element in the picture, which only reinforces its attraction for a Western audience. What could perhaps be regarded as more Indian in his life, i.e. travelling around like a *guru*, a spiritual master, is skipped. The predominantly Western reviews and its positive reception particularly in Western countries only confirm this.

The third and fourth picture, BUDDHA and TATHAGATA BUDDHA, obviously have an Indian background. The filmmakers clearly attempted to follow the example of Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN. Both the music and the pictorial representation call the style of the mythologicals to mind. Unlike TATHAGATA BUDDHA, BUDDHA does not include the number of songs common to classic Indian films. This is probably one of the reasons why BUDDHA does not reach the level of Sagar's serial. It was already explained in Chapter Three that in Indian films it is first and foremost the music that appeals to the public. It was sound that made the Indian films adapt almost completely to traditional Indian theatre. Music prevailed above all other elements. In the BUDDHA series the relationships between King Suddhodana and his first and second spouses are full of emotion as is Yashodhara's attitude towards both her royal husband and her stepmother-in-law. Queen Pajapati's indignation over the behaviour of her own son Devadatta also strongly colours the sequences presenting it. Siddhattha, however, remains aloof. Only his confusion and his depression about the suffering he encounters enters the limelight. Nonetheless, it is clear that BUDDHA, in contrast to the other two Buddha films, makes use of the Indian way of evoking emotion,

but because of its lack of many attractive songs, the aloofness of Prince Siddhattha and the inferior acting by many of the actors, the picture fails to attain the level and the emotional power needed to become really attractive to the Indian audience. The lack of success of BUDDHA confirms this.

The only supernatural phenomenon in THE LIGHT OF ASIA is the divine voice that gives Siddhattha the decisive impulse to leave his wife. As a consequence, this picture reinforces Buddha's humanity: he is a man who had to listen once to a voice from the world beyond. Bertolucci's movie, however, has many surreal elements, one of which is that the three children see the last stage of Siddhattha's struggle to attain enlightenment. Siddhattha's life story is full of these elements, whereas they are almost absent in Jesse's story—the only time is the appearance of *Lama* Norbu's spirit to the children after he has died. The supernatural is clearly part of the Eastern world in which Buddhism developed. It is possible that Bertolucci was asking Western viewers to open their minds in this way to the impossible.

BUDDHA reflects the worldview of traditional Hinduism, in which supernatural events are part of the natural world. The heavenly gods are often seen. Moreover, they intervene regularly in Siddhattha's life. The Enlightened One is presented as an incarnation of Bhagvan, which means 'the Lord' and is often used as a title for Vishnu. Hindu gods like Brahma, Yama, Vayu, Agni and Mara regularly strew flowers and worship Siddhattha when he is still a boy. And they intervene particularly when he must break with the luxurious life at court. They become incarnate in order to disturb Siddhattha; they make the people in the palace sleepy and open the gates when Siddhattha wishes to leave. Furthermore, it is as if Mara guides Siddhattha in the direction of a life ultimately resulting in his enlightenment. Other gods figuring in the picture are Indra, Vishvakarma and Shiva, although Shiva and Vishnu only appear in the Tushita heaven—one more suggestion that the filmmakers saw an incarnation of Vishnu in Buddha, an opinion shared by many traditional Hindus. In this respect TATHAGATA BUDDHA differs completely from BUDDHA, because in this feature the only supernatural events that are seen are those in connection with Buddha's enlightenment.

THE LIGHT OF ASIA portrays Buddha as a sensitive person both in his youth and as an adult. Therefore, he does not really fit into his own royal milieu, even though is he is obviously a master of the martial

arts and beats his rivals for the hand of Gopa. He is deeply attached to his wife. Only a (divine) voice is able to make him decide to leave her. After that, however, he follows his path to enlightenment through meditation strictly. In the meantime, he reveals the absurdity of the horrible practices of Indian asceticism and the cruelty of slaughtering animals to sacrifice them to the gods. Buddha is clearly against all violence—violence against animals as well as that against human beings. His message is that one has to travel the path of the good in order to have control over oneself, not to be dominated any longer by the consequences of evil behaviour. Furthermore, he discovers that sorrow is only a passing phase and that happiness lies in giving. The focus of the film is not on his being a spiritual master guiding the people to salvation, however, but on his relationship with Gopa. Compassion is the word that best characterizes him. But the danger here is that the story of the film sinks to the level of being just another love story in which the lovers ultimately find each other again.

Bertolucci's LITTLE BUDDHA depicts Buddha as a handsome prince living in an environment full of Eastern mystery. In his youth he loves sports and marries a beautiful princess. Only his own words as a baby, which he seems to have forgotten later, and the predictions by the sage Asita remind the viewer of another dimension. The tour he takes of the city changes everything: his eyes are opened. He discovers that to exist is to suffer and that he will suffer as well, because 'they were him and he was them'. It is then that he sees the task for which he was destined. And he achieves victory in a meditation that turns out to be a fiery war against the powers of evil. He succeeds in subduing all evil powers, in particular those that come from his own ego. In the end, he discovers that this life full of suffering is illusion. In this illusion everything follows the law of cause and effect, the law of *karma*. The task of the human being is to realize this, to be compassionate towards all beings and to pass on her knowledge to them. Enlightenment is the discovery that this life is ultimately illusion. If one realizes this, then he has defeated all evil. Buddha's life after his enlightenment is obviously not interesting. There is nothing heroic about it and it consists only in the preaching of this message to the people of his time.

It may be concluded, therefore, that in spite of its Eastern context, in this film Siddhattha resembles the ideal of the Western American youth who loves sports and hopes to find a beautiful wife. Furthermore, it presents him as the hero who subdues all evil, which is very similar to

what many other heroes do in American movies. So, to a great extent Buddha is like an American male and behaves like an American hero, although he does so in a mysterious, surrealistic Eastern environment. The more Indian aspects of his life, such as travelling around like a *guru* are not included.

The picture also omits some important elements of Buddha's message. The audience will not be confronted with the Four Noble Truths Buddha preached, including the Eightfold Path with its focus on ethics and contemplation, nor with other more ascetic aspects of Buddhism. This message is more about Buddhism's view of reality—a reality that includes much suffering indeed. A good friend of Jesse's father dies and Jesse's father loses his job. The suffering of the sick, the elderly and those who have to cremate someone they know well is also depicted. The answer is that there is no death and no fear in the end. The reality full of suffering is illusion. 'Every movement in the universe is an effect provoked by a course.' What is needed is compassion and nothing more, since 'there is no salvation without compassion for every being.' Whoever realizes this will no longer be afraid but will, instead, be full of compassion. How compassion has to be implemented—the ethics of it—is not revealed. In this way Buddha's message is adapted to the life of modern Westerners, represented in the movie by Jesse's father, who are less interested in morality and asceticism but wrestle with the fact of life's finitude. It is interesting that, for Bertolucci himself, the most important thing in the doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation means that the 'thoughts we have had, the work we have done is definitely not lost'.

After *Lama* Norbu dies, he adds one more lesson, namely that the children have to pass on their knowledge. Thus, the decision of the Buddha to preach what he had discovered is translated to the modern world, but again, the content of his preaching remains concealed. The conclusion is that Buddha's message in this film is that this life full of suffering will ultimately be discovered to be illusion. What counts is that everything follows the path of causality and the only thing the human being has to do is to be compassionate to all beings and to pass on his knowledge to them.

G. Adi Sheshagiri Rao's BUDDHA presents a Hindu view of the life of the Enlightened One. The context of Buddha's life is very Brahmanic. Sumedha is born into a Brahman family and everything that happens in this family is explained in detail. Life at King Suddhodana's court is also completely embedded in a Hindu Brahman culture. The priests

and the sages are frequently consulted and the king is eager to follow their instructions. The necessary rituals are always performed, and it is explained more than once what is correct and what not. The eight vows Queen Maya promises to keep are not those of a Buddhist laywoman but seem to be derived from Hindu ethics. The film is furthermore full of wise lessons: living close to Buddha makes someone morally better—a notion that reflects ideas common in *bhakti* Hinduism. All this underscores the fact that the filmmakers were more familiar with Hinduism than with Buddhism.

However, although Buddha is placed within a Hindu context, he is also portrayed sometimes as someone who criticizes certain elements of Hinduism, in particular its astrology. For example, he says that all days are auspicious, since they are all created by God. It is possible that the filmmaker thus tried to portray Buddha as someone with a more modern and scientific worldview than the somewhat credulous people around him. Nonetheless, as already stated earlier, the supernatural permeates the whole picture.

Moreover, Buddha's criticism of the caste system is almost absent. Only once does his idea concerning the equality of all human beings come to the fore, i.e. when Sujata, who gives him food, gives birth to a child and gratefully tells her servant that she is now no longer her servant but her equal. His criticism of the Brahmans is reflected in his inner dialogue prior to his struggle with Mara. Siddhattha answers a series of questions posed by a man standing in front of him and explains that it is the practice of his knowledge of the creation and his support of the *dharma*, which means religion but also morality, that makes someone a Brahman. So his focus is on the practice of his knowledge and morality, and not on birth, ritual appearances and knowledge of the details of the scriptures. But although this reflects certain passages in the oldest Buddhist texts (Schumann: 220–221), it is something that can also be heard in Hindu circles.

In his enlightenment Siddhattha vanquishes the forces of evil, the power of the ties of the family as well as the responsibilities put on his shoulders because of his being the crown prince. In the end he finds out that everything in the universe is momentary. Only true knowledge is true. It is thus that he finds peace; his ego is conquered and he finds the way out of the cycle of birth and death. What is striking is that this is not necessarily different from the teachings of, for example, Vedanta Hinduism. BUDDHA skips Buddha's life after his enlightenment, which is all the more striking since almost 1/5 of the movie is devoted to his

previous life as Sumedha. So, one may conclude that this feature also narrates first and foremost the story of a hero who vanquishes the powers of evil. He does so, however, only because he has been put on this path by the Hindu gods and instructed in how to succeed by the Hindu ascetics.

The Buddha of TATHAGATA BUDDHA seems to be first and foremost a teacher of wisdom. This image is strengthened by the circumstance that, unlike the other features, this film—being the only one of this category—is a real biopic that shows a large part of Buddha's life after his enlightenment as well.

The documentary films narrate Buddha's life after his enlightenment as well and they pay attention, moreover, to his doctrine and the development of early Buddhism. The description of the enlightenment Buddha attained is remarkable. In GOTAMA THE BUDDHA it is truth that makes an end to all craving, whereas in the LIFE OF BUDDHA it is complete freedom from all suffering, an experience of non-fear, which is the foundation of all happiness. The latter also pays a great deal of attention to Buddha's doctrine. GOTAMA THE BUDDHA emphasizes Buddha's fighting for non-violence and his siding with the poor, which seems to reflect the political climate in India at the time of its release, when the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) was still strong in the country.

2. Historical Background

This section will focus on the portrayal of Buddha in the Asian tradition, since the development of Buddhism exceeded the boundaries of the Indian subcontinent and became influential in many areas in Central, East, South and Southeast Asia. The section consists of two parts. The first will concentrate on the visual representation of the Awakened One, whereas the second is devoted to the characterization of the Enlightened One encountered in philosophical[18] and literary sources.

[18] Because of the discussion on the issue of whether Buddhism is a religion or not, I prefer to use the term philosophical, thus avoiding the term 'theological' which I used in Chapter Three on Rama.

2.1. *The Visual Representation of Buddha*

Buddha's appearance in THE LIGHT OF ASIA is nothing special. He is a luxuriously dressed, beardless young man with long straight black hair. When he leaves the palace, he is wearing a headdress; when he lives as an ascetic his dress is simpler, but his hair remains the same. The only difference is that now he has no headdress when he walks outside. In THE LITTLE BUDDHA Prince Siddhattha dons a sober but clearly royal dressing. He has long straight black hair down to his shoulders. When he decides to become an ascetic he cuts off half his hair and from that moment on has a pageboy haircut. Furthermore, he wears the sober outfit of an ascetic. In the last two pictures, BUDDHA and TATHAGATA BUDDHA, Prince Siddhattha is dressed like the princes in the Indian mythological films. He wears royal vestments and often has his long black hair combed back like the princes in this movie genre. When he becomes an ascetic, he wears their sober orange garments and his hair is shorter and arranged in small curls similar to those found on Buddha statues. Moreover, his hair is somewhat conic on the top of his head, which reminds one of the *ushnisha* most statues of Buddha have. *Ushnisha* is Sanskrit and literally means turban. With respect to Buddha it reminds one of the royal dignity the turban expresses, even though it is usually not a real turban but simply a knot of hair on the top of his head, which seems to hide some sort of bulge on his head (Krishan: 121–126). The background to this will be discussed below in this section.

In all four films the appearance of Buddha, in particular after his becoming an ascetic deviates from the reality described in the oldest Buddhist texts. The Majjhima Nikaya states that Buddha cut off his coal-black hair and beard and put on the yellow robes worn by the ascetics (Majjhima Nikaya 1,163; 1,240; 2,93 and 2,211),[19] just as a novice does today when he enters the Buddhist *sanga*. The Majjhima Nikaya is part of the Tipitaka, which are the oldest Buddhist scriptures. The oldest version of them, the Pali translation, was written down in Sri Lanka around 80 BCE, though much of its content is of a much older date (Harvey: 3), since texts of these scriptures are found already on some stone inscriptions issued by Emperor Ashoka in 255 BCE (De Breet and Jansen: 23–24). Later texts also report that Buddha shaved off his hair

[19] Horner 1954–1959, volume 1: 207; 295; volume 2: 281; 401.

and beard (Mahavastu 2,165; Lalitavistara, prose part between verse 15,102 and 15,103; Buddhacarita 6,57).[20] This means that, surprisingly, the documentary the LIFE OF BUDDHA comes closest to Buddha's true appearance, since here scenes of Buddha's life after he became an ascetic are represented by a Buddhist monk with a shaved head. Only the Nidanakatha, a Pali text dating probably from as late as the 5th century CE (Seth: 22), gives a deviating description. It says that 'his hair was reduced to two inches length, and curling from the right, it lay close to his head. It remained that length as long as he lived, and the beard the same' (Rhys Davids: 177). This evidently reflects the appearance of Buddha's hair in the images of that time of the Enlightened One, although the images are beardless.[21] This appearance was apparently used in the BUDDHA serial as well, also without a beard.

The oldest reliefs and images depicting Buddhist scenes found in India were found in Sanchi and Bharhut. Old reliefs and images have also been discovered in Sri Lanka, in Amaravati, dating from the era between 300 BCE and 100 CE. None of them depicts Buddha in his anthropomorphic form.

The Samyutta Nikaya, which is also part of the Tipitaka, states:

> Since a Tathagata, even when actually present, is incomprehensible, it is inept to say of him—of the Uttermost Person, the Supernatural Person, the Attainer of the Supernatural—that after dying the Tathagata is, or is not, or both is and is not, neither is nor not (Samyutta Nikaya 3,118).[22]

What this means is explained in the Anguttara Nikaya, another section of the Tipitaka. There the Awakened One answers some questions posed by the Brahmin Dona, denying that he will become a *deva* (god), a *gandharva* (celestial musician), a *yakkha* (goblin) or another human being. He explains that the outflows composing his bodily existence have been extinguished and rooted out; therefore they will not arise again in the future (Anguttara Nikaya 2,37–39).[23] He claims 'a unique position, more precisely, entity for himself', something like what the Niddesa, another text belonging to the Tipitaka, called *devatideva*, 'the

[20] Jones, volume 1: xi; volume 2: 161; Goswami: 212; Schotsman: 108–110.
[21] See, for example, Snellgrove, p. 93.
[22] Conze: 106.
[23] Conze: 105.

god beyond the gods' (Krishan: 120; Thomas: 214).[24] So he transcends everything.

In the 5th century BCE, when the Enlightened One lived (Gombrich; Harvey: 9),[25] and later the Vedic gods were not represented in images (Choudhury: 205; Flood: 40–41; Harvey: 80; Pal: 38; Sugirtharaja: 166–167).[26] So, if Buddha was a 'god beyond the gods', it was only natural that no images were made of him. John and Suzan Huntington, however, claim that there was no aniconic period. They suppose that images of Buddha did exist but were made of perishable material like wood. Many stone objects often existed previously in wood. Furthermore, there is no text forbidding an anthropomorphic representation of Buddha (Huntington 1985: 70; 123–124; 627; 630). Nonetheless, it remains remarkable that beautiful reliefs and images were carved in stone including depictions of human beings, whereas a representation of the Awakened One in his anthropomorphic form is lacking. So it is almost inevitable that there was great resistance to depicting Buddha.[27]

Nonetheless, Buddha was represented but only by symbols. Maya's dream of an elephant entering her womb symbolized his conception, a lotus flower or Maya delivering while holding the branches of a tree his birth, a riderless horse his departure from court life, an empty seat bearing two footprints under a *bodhi* tree his enlightenment, the Buddhist wheel his beginning to teach the doctrine, and a *stupa* his decease (Krishan: 1). Suzan Huntington warns against a symbolic interpretation of these depictions. She points out that in those centuries relics were held in much higher esteem than images. So it was more natural to depict *stupa*s, so-called *dhamma* wheels and *bodhi* trees by an altar rather than images of the Awakened One. This can also explain why it took more than four centuries before the first stone images of Buddha were made. Furthermore, it means that interpreting these pictures symbolically as if they are replace images of Buddha may miss the point (Huntington 2007).

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[24] Thomas refers to Niddesa 1,355 (Thomas: 213–214).

[25] There are, however, still scholars who cling to the traditional dating of Buddha's death around 480 BCE (Scholz: 51). Gombrich dates Buddha's death around 404 BCE (Gombrich: 251).

[26] The first images of Vedic gods date from the first century CE (Pal: 15–38).

[27] Yuvraj Krishan gives a thorough and convincing refutation of the claims by the Huntingtons that there was no aniconic period (Krishan: 20–22).

The oldest anthropomorphic images of Buddha are found in Gandhara, a region extending over parts of Punjab, the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moreover, human images of Buddha dating from approximately the same time have been detected in the area of Mathura. At that time Gandhara formed the most western part of the empire of the Kushan kings, while the area of Mathura was probably the most eastern part. Buddha was not only carved in stone but also depicted on the coins issued by the Kushan king Kanishka I, whose reign—if Yuvraj Krishan (b. 1922) is right in his dating—started in 78 CE (Krishan: 39). This means that the coins date from around 80 CE (Krishan: 34–36). Other scholars, however, date Kanishka I later in the first part of the second century CE (Snellgrove: 47).

Various academic experts, including Krishan,[28] believe that the stone images found in Gandhara are the oldest. Krishan argued that Gandhara was strongly influenced by the Greeks, which resulted in a different view of representing divine personalities. While the Vedic deities were not depicted in India, the Greeks had many images of their gods. According to Krishan the foreign Greek influence resulted in a change of attitude towards depicting Buddha, and it was Gandhara that influenced Mathura (Krishan: 29–34). A.K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and some other experts are of the opinion that the Buddha image in the region of Mathura was created independently,[29] whereas there are also scholars who believe that Mathura was first.[30]

All these images of Buddha date from the middle or even near the beginning of the first century CE (Snellgrove: 59, 456). All of them already have a knot of hair on top of Buddha's head. In Gandhara it is tied up in a chignon and in Mathura as a single large coil (Krishan: 29, 125–126), both reminding one of the topknot of an ascetic who does not shave his hair. According to Krishan, it is indicative of Buddha's spiritual sovereignty, since it calls to mind the *ushnisha* or turban worn by kings and Brahman priests on the occasion of the offerings made during the consecration of a king. The coil of Mathura, moreover, reminds one of the god Brahma (Krishan: 125–126). Krishan

[28] Some others are Alfred Foucher (1865–1952) and Benjamin Rowland (1904–1972) (Kushan: 28; Snellgrove: 67, 71).

[29] The other representatives are Ahmad Hasan Dani (b. 1920) and David L. Snellgrove (Kushan: 28; Snellgrove: 59). Peter Harvey simply writes that they were produced at about the same time (Harvey: 81).

[30] The Dutch scholar Johanna E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw (1919–1983) (Kushan: 28; Snellgrove: 59 note 15).

convincingly demonstrates that the *ushnisha* has nothing to do with the so-called *mahapurusha lakshana*s, the signs designating one as a special person and a Buddha, since these are never shown on a Buddha sculpture (Krishan: 122–125).

Subsequently, the *ushnisha* developed into a kind of cranial protuberance, which became a sign that this person was a Buddha or *bodhisatta* (a person on his way to becoming a Buddha). In later times it even developed into a crown (Krishan: 132–140) or, as in South India since the 13th century and in Thailand since the 14th century, into a flame (Snellgrove: 289–291; 321–322; Website *Buddhist Studies: Art and Architecture*).

In conclusion, it may be repeated that the appearance of the monk in the documentary film, LIFE OF BUDDHA, corresponds most closely to the outward appearance of Buddha in the oldest sources, whereas the appearances of the Enlightened One in BUDDHA and TATHAGATA BUDDHA resemble very much the appearance of the Buddha images of the 5th century. The appearance of Siddhattha in THE LITTLE BUDDHA during his struggle against Mara and his enlightenment recalls the appearance of the Buddha images as well, since he has a topknot at that time.

2.2. *The Ideological Background*

The oldest sources that reveal details of Buddha's life are various parts of the Tipitaka. Although these texts focus on monastic rules and on the teachings of the Elevated One, they also, incidentally, give some information about a number of details of Buddha's life.[31] They tell, for example, about the shining splendour that emanated from his body, illuminating all the dark regions of the universe when he entered his mother's womb. They relate the seven strides he made to the north almost directly after his birth announcing himself to be the eldest of the world. They narrate the death of his mother seven days later. They tell about the visit of Asita who announced that the young prince would become either a great conqueror or a Buddha rolling back the veil of the

[31] E.H. Brewster's 1926 book, *The Life of Gotama the Buddha (Compiled Exclusively from the Pali Canon)*, gives a compilation of all passages that include information about Buddha's life.

world. The deep experience of great joy under the *jambu* tree[32] is indicated, as well as the fact that Buddha was married and had a son called Rahula,[33] the trips during which he met an old man, sick men, a dead body and an ascetic, and his nightly departure from the court. Buddha's cutting his hair is related, and his being a disciple of Alara Kalama and Rama's son Uddaka respectively, his severe asceticism, including his choice for the middle path, the meditation under the *bodhi* tree during which he discovered the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, received deep insight in the laws of the cosmos, including the births of himself and those of other beings and the attainment of *nibbana*. Remarkably enough, the victory over the attacks of Mara is not related here. Mara appears much later when the Enlightened One is already the leader of a community of monks and nuns. For the Tipitaka also give information about Buddha's life after his enlightenment. The texts tell about the intervention of the god Brahma Sahampati to convince the Awakened One to preach the truth he discovered to other people. They tell about his teaching to his five former disciples, the many meetings and dialogues he had, the increasing number of monks that followed him, the acceptance of nuns, the friendship he maintained with kings like Bimbisara and Pasenadi, the parks he received, and in the end even about the last words he spoke to his disciples and his entering *nibbana* at his death. Furthermore, the Tipitaka speak about Buddha's condemnation of the arrogance of the Brahmans as well as about his rejection of eating meat and animal sacrifices (Brewster; Thomas: 176–177). Devadatta is also present in these texts, but only in the second part of Buddha's life when Devadatta becomes the leader of an opposition movement within the Buddhist order (Brewster: 30–42; 135, 146–163). The stories concerning Devadatta's maliciousness in Buddha's youth or towards Buddha's wife are completely absent.

The previous section disclosed that in the earliest texts Buddha was already regarded as someone who occupied a unique position similar to that of the god Brahma or even higher than this deity, since he was described as 'something like a god beyond the gods' (Krishan: 120). Nevertheless, it may be said that in spite of the legendary elements sometimes found in the ancient sources, the Tipitaka portray Buddha

[32] Some publications, such as Thomas', speak about a rose apple tree, but in South and Southeast Asia the fruit is called *jambu*.

[33] See note 2.

as a very talented person, a human being with extraordinary wisdom and intelligence who only develops certain supernatural qualities while travelling the path that ultimately ends in his enlightenment. Only after his enlightenment does he truly possess magical and supernatural abilities. For example, he uses magic to persuade Uruvela Kassapa to become his disciple (Vinaya Pitaka, Mahavagga 1).[34] In the Anguttara Nikaya Buddha explains this in his answer to the questions of a certain Brahman as follows:

> Brahmin, those outflows whereby, if they had not been extinguished, I might have been a deva, gandharva, yakkha or a human being—those outflows are extinguished in me, cut off at the root, made like a palm-tree stump that can come to no further existence in the future. Just as a blue, red or white lotus, although born in the water, grown up in the water, when it reaches the surface stands there unsoiled by the water—just so, Brahmin, although born in the world, grown up in the world, having overcome the world, I abide unsoiled by the world. Take it that I am Buddha, Brahmin. (Anguttara Nikaya 2,38)[35]

The Enlightened One is now no longer subject to the same conditions of existence as ordinary human beings: he has reached the level of the supramundane. He is also beyond the divine, although Edward J. Thomas (1869–1958) rightly remarks that 'the possibility of a god free from all bonds is not…thought of' (Thomas: 215; see also Harvey: 28–29, 81). After his enlightenment Buddha transcends the gods, but it is good to realize that all this occurs within the Indian worldviews of the time, where gods are part of cosmos.[36]

The emergence of anthropomorphic images of Buddha coincides with the composition of the first biographies of the Enlightened One. The Buddhists were more interested earlier in his doctrines and monastic and ethical prescriptions, but around the beginning of the Common Era people increasingly adopted a more devotional attitude towards their own religion. For that reason they wanted to know more details of the life of the person they adored. In response to their need, new works were written, of which Ashvagosha's Buddhacarita is probably the oldest, at least in Sanskrit. Ashvaghosha was a Brahman who lived in the first half of the first century CE and converted to Theravada

[34] Brewster: 79–93.
[35] Conze: 105, see also Thomas: 215.
[36] So there is no direct affinity with the concept of god in the Abrahamic religions.

Buddhism (Schotsman: i–ii). The Buddhacarita presents the Buddha's complete life story from his birth to his entrance into *nibbana* at his death, but unfortunately only the first 14 of 28 cantos of the Sanskrit text are preserved. The 14th canto ends with Buddha's decision to preach the truth he had discovered in his enlightenment to his five former disciples (Bareau: 135; Schotsman; Seth: 23–24). Although Ved Seth remarks that the miraculous element is not stressed in this epic (Seth: 24), the difference with the earlier texts belonging to the Tipitaka is considerable. Now the celestial gods interfere to prevent Siddhattha from being absorbed into the luxurious and happy life of the court of his father, whereas in the Tipitaka it was the prince's own decision to leave the palace, a decision caused by his confrontation with old age, disease and death. In the Buddhacarita the heavenly deities 'created the illusion there of an old man, inspiring the prince to go forth as a monk' (Buddhacarita 3,26),[37] and they do so again by showing him a sick person and later a dead body while at the same time inspiring the prince's charioteer to speak the wise words necessary to change his mind and to guide him to a park where he meets an ascetic (Buddhacarita 3,40; 53; 56; 65).[38] The Buddhacarita also replaces some events, the most important replacement being that of shifting the struggle with Mara to a moment just before the final stage of his last meditation before attaining enlightenment (Buddhacarita 13).[39] Furthermore, the text inserts some new stories as well, such as the offering of a bowl with milk by Nandabala, the daughter of a herdsman just before Siddhattha's struggle with Mara (Buddhacarita 12,109–113).[40] The text is the first one to call Buddha's wife Yashodhara (Buddhacarita 2,26).[41]

The next important biography came into being in the 3rd century CE, the Lalitavistara (Seth: 21). This text, also written in Sanskrit, starts in the so-called Tushita heaven already, where the Enlightened One stayed before his last birth into human life, but before it narrates the events of his human existence, it gives some details of his previous lives as a bear, a horse and even a god. The text then comes to his life in the

[37] Schotsman: 40.
[38] Schotsman: 44–49.
[39] Schotsman: 222–237. Another incident that is placed elsewhere is the experience of joy of the young prince under the shade of a *jambu* tree. It is now no longer part of Buddha's youth but has been moved to after his meeting an ascetic, when he is already married (Buddhacarita, canto 5,8–11; Schotsman: 76–79).
[40] Schotsman: 218.
[41] Schotsman: 26.

Tushita heaven where he is surrounded by 12,000 monks and 32,000 *bodhisattas*. There he is also provided with all the luxuries of life and is in the meantime honoured and worshipped by the gods. To their great disappointment, he decides, out of compassion for all sentient beings, to be born again in the world of human beings. Preparations are made to make a sensible decision about the family in which the future Buddha will be born. It is remarkable that it has to be Brahman or a *kshatriya* family, which seems to contradict Buddha's own rejection of the caste system. Nearly all the additions to his life story made by the Buddhacarita return in this book, but more stories are added, such as, for example, the prostration of the Hindu gods before the prince when he visits a temple for the first time as a young boy. After the incident flowers rain from heaven. Another event inserted into Buddha's life story is the extraordinary knowledge Siddhattha displays when he, to the astonishment of his teacher, turns out to know all scripts including those of the Chinese and the Huns. In fact, the incident reveals his omniscience. In the Lalitavistara the intervention of the heavenly gods to lead the prince to a life as an ascetic is accompanied by dreams dreamed by his father and by his wife prophesying his decision to leave the court. In this text his wife is named Gopa. The Lalitavistara ends with Buddha teaching the truth he found in his enlightenment to his five former disciples (Goswami; Khosla 1991: 1–30; Thomas: 46–50).

Sarla Khosla points out that after his descent to the human world Buddha, according to the Lalitavistara, still lives as an ordinary human being, with the worldly needs of foods, clothes and medicine, but through his own effort in many pre-births he attains the position of Buddhahood and thus becomes *devatideva*. All the Hindu gods, including Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, are described as inferior to him. Since he 'has crossed the ocean of existence' he will establish all beings in a place free from old age and death. He has taken this birth solely to instruct all sentient beings. In the Lalitavistara the superhuman and miraculous element, however, has been completely blended (Khosla 1991: 101–105). The elaborate delineation of the gloriousness of Buddha's stay in the Tushita heaven before entering a human existence as well as the series of miraculous events in his youth and his supernatural qualities reveal that despite the fact that Buddha is an ordinary man, he did not become supermundane only after his enlightenment. He was that all the time he was living in the human world. He is simultaneously both human and divine. That is the difference from the Tipitaka, where he transcends the human condition only on his way to enlightenment.

Thus, in the Lalitavistara we are standing on the threshold of Mahayana Buddhism.

The next important biography of the Enlightened One is the Mahavastu, the compilation of which may have begun in the 2nd century BCE but was not completed until the 4th century CE (Jones, volume 1: xi). This text delineates Buddha as an omniscient being who only pretends to make mistakes, such as his choice for stern asceticism. He is always meditating. No dust sticks to his feet, and he is never tired. He eats out of mere conformity to the world, and so as to give others a chance to gain a great deal of 'merit' by giving him alms and food. The Buddha of the Mahavastu is completely transcendent (Harvey: 89).

The last biography of the Enlightened One that deserves attention is the Nidanakatha, which was already mentioned in section 3.1. It probably dates from the 5th century. In fact, the text is a commentary on the poetic verses of the Buddhavamsa, which it includes. The Nidanakatha starts with the previous life of Buddha as a human being when he was Sumedha, the faithful son of pious Brahmin parents. In this life he meets the preceding Buddha Dipankara and then decides to become a Buddha himself. The Nidanakatha then relates a series of other stories about Buddha's previous lives, including the one in which he was King Vesantara who was even prepared to give away his own children. Then Buddha's stay in the Tushita heaven is related, followed by the story of Buddha's life ending with his acceptance of the Jetavana resort in the town of Savatthi (Rhys Davids). So the Nidanakatha also relates a large part of Buddha's life after his enlightenment.

Both the Lalitavistara and the Nidanakatha include many miraculous events in their descriptions of the life of the Awakened One. His life is preceded by his previous lives in which he performs many good deeds and by his stay in the Tushita heaven. His birth and many other incidents, in particular his departure from the palace and his victory over Mara, are accompanied by miraculous events. There is a small difference, however. In the Lalitavistara these miraculous incidents consist of praises by the gods and other celestial beings, including the rain of flowers from heaven from time to time. They predominate over cosmic events. The Nidanakatha, however, paints Buddha's life as a cosmic event, in which his birth and his defeat of Mara in particular have cosmic dimensions. The praise of the gods and other celestial beings is still present but seems to be of less importance. Furthermore, the Nidanakatha elaborates on Buddha's victory over Mara, which seems

to be of greater importance than his insights into the twelvefold chain of causality and the 10,000 world systems. Nonetheless, his insights result in a cosmic paradise (Rhys Davids: 190–198).[42] The Lalitavistara devotes a separate section to Buddha's meditative experiences in the night of his enlightenment, which still recalls the representations of this night in earlier Buddhist texts (Goswami: 312–324).

In conclusion, it may be determined that the biographies discussed in the present section all repeat the details of Buddha's life included in preceding works, but all insert new incidents and—what is perhaps more important—some additions to the view of Buddha. An important change is that in the Mahavastu and Nidanakatha the enlightenment consists predominantly of his victory over Mara. The discovery of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, the insight into the births of himself and those of other beings and his experience of the *nibbana* are completely absent. Furthermore, only little attention is paid to the deep insights Buddha gained into the laws of the cosmos (Mahavastu 2,237–241; 264–270; 277–293; 314–356; 397–419; 3,281–286; Rhys Davids: 189–197).[43]

Whereas in the Tipitaka Buddha was a human being transcending the confinements of his humanity when he began his life as an ascetic and attained enlightenment and deep insight into the real nature of human existence and cosmic reality, in later texts he developed into a god who transcends all other supernatural beings, who adopts human existence in his last birth but without losing his divine and magic qualities. To the contrary, his most important action is his victory over the king of evil, which he gained by steadfastly repelling all attacks, even the most magical ones, thus proving his superiority also in magic. Moreover, the events of his human existence had great cosmic effects. In the meantime, he is time and again praised and honoured by the gods and other celestial beings, more than once raining their celestial flowers on him to show their gratitude.

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[42] Sayings like 'The blind from birth received their sight; the deaf from birth heard sound; the lame from birth could use their feet; and chains and bonds were loosed and fell away' (Rhys Davids: 198) call to mind the messianic promises of Isaiah 29:18; 35:5–6; 61:1.

[43] Jones, volume 2: 223–227, 248–253, 260–274, 294–324, 353–372; volume 3: 268–274. See also Khosla 1989: 97–98.

It goes beyond the purview of this study to continue this description of the development of what is often called Buddhology in the study of Buddhism. It is obvious that in the end Buddha has become completely transcendent in the minds of most Buddhists, even though he had spent various lives as an animal or as a human being, not least his last life when he attained enlightenment. Now it is time to return to the films made about Buddha.

The Light of Asia and Tathagata Buddha portray Buddha as a prince and later a spiritual teacher about whom there is nothing miraculous. So these films apparently do not follow any of the lines presented in Buddhist tradition. The Light of Asia includes, however, one supernatural event: the voice that incites the prince to leave his wife and the palace. This reflects what is found in later texts, beginning with the Buddhacarita, since in all of them it is the deities who urge Prince Siddhattha to leave his wife and the court. Nonetheless, The Light of Asia follows these texts only minimally in this respect. There are no deities in the film—only a divine voice. Another remarkable thing is that The Light of Asia chooses the name Gopa for his consort, a name that has its origins in the Lalitavistara. Furthermore, it includes two incidents that deal with Devadatta's malicious attitude. The first one is the popular narrative about the goose that was shot by Devadatta but cured by Siddhattha. The oldest source including this popular narrative is a relatively late one, a Chinese Tipitaka version dating from the 8th century.[44] It is absent from all other texts mentioned so far in the present chapter. The second one is Devadatta's crude attempt to marry Yashodhara after Siddhattha has left the palace, which is related in the Mahavastu (Mahavastu 2,69).[45] Although the name of Gopa, the divine voice and the sequences about Devadatta are elements recalling later biographies of the Enlightened One, Franz Osten's film presents many of the main details of Buddha's life story narrated already in the Tipitaka. Moreover, it omits Mara's defeat as a stage in attaining enlightenment. For this reason, but also because of its emphasis on Buddha's humanness, The Light of Asia is closest to the oldest part of Buddhist tradition. Aside from this, it also includes a number of

[44] The source is the Chinese edition of the Vinaya Pitaka of the Mulasarvastivadin school of Mahayana Buddhism (Mukherjee: 2,4,119). The absence of the narrative from the other texts is remarkable since the story has become one of the most well-known stories today about Buddha's youth.

[45] Jones, volume 2: 66–67.

remarkable deviations absent from Buddhist tradition, such as the walk of an elephant to indicate a new heir for the throne and the focus on the relationship between Buddha and Gopa ending in the statement that Gopa became Buddha's first disciple. So the picture deals very freely with what is offered by Buddhist tradition. In fact, the film is first and foremost a love story about a woman who loses her husband but fortunately finds him again.

Bertolucci's LITTLE BUDDHA is more in accordance with Buddhist tradition. It also includes many miraculous events, in particular in the section of the movie that takes place in India. The birth of Siddhattha reflects Buddhist tradition as does the announcement by Asita and the resistance of King Suddhodana, the journey of the prince outside the palace, his departure from the court, his meeting with his five disciples, the fact that his skin becomes black and his decision to eat the food offered him by a young girl. The struggle against Mara and some descriptions of the enlightenment are also present in Buddhist tradition. The details chiefly follow even those of the oldest texts, although Yashodhara's name comes from the Buddhacarita. Moreover, this name is common in Tibetan Buddhism. The representation of the final stages before the enlightenment, including Mara's defeat and the display of the enlightenment itself seem to be derived from the Mahavastu and the Nidanakatha, since the focus is on Buddha's victory over Mara and his insight into the laws of the universe. What is new is *Lama* Norbu's explanation that the most significant element of Buddha's enlightenment was his discovery of the importance of compassion. In fact, the Tipitaka reveals that it was the god Brahma Sahampati who convinced him to make his experience known to other people.

Therefore, the conclusion is justified that Bertolucci's picture closely follows the oldest texts with regard to Siddhattha's life in the palace and his renunciation of it, but in its representation and clarification of the enlightenment it is inspired both by the Mahavastu and the Nidanakatha, and by Tibetan Buddhism. The impact of Tibetan Buddhism is, moreover, underscored by the choice of Yashodhara as the name for Siddhattha's consort and by the context of Tibetan Buddhism represented in many sequences.

The third film, BUDDHA, is first and foremost a representation of what is found in the Buddhacarita, the Lalitavistara, the Mahavastu and the Nidanakatha. It shows various events that are found only in these texts, such as, for example, the appearance of Sumedha, the stay of the Enlightened One in the Tushita heaven, the worship of the young

prince by the heavenly gods, the intervention of the gods as well as the dreams of King Suddhodana and Princess Yashodhara. A special case is the growing antagonism between Siddhattha and Devadatta during their youth, quite a number of incidents of which are shown, including the popular narrative about the goose and Devadatta's crude attempt to marry Yashodhara after Siddhattha's renunciation of court life.

A thorough analysis of Sheshagiri Rao's picture reveals that 289 of the 581 sequences represent material found in these four texts, which is nearly half of the picture. 202 sequences are inspired by the Nidanakatha, 200 by the Lalitavistara, 186 by the Mahavastu and 171 by the Buddhacarita. The great majority of these scenes are found in all four of these texts, but it is clear that the Nidanakatha and the Lalitavistara were the main sources of inspiration for the picture. It seems that the Nidanakatha has provided the structure of the story, whereas the gaps are completed by material derived from the Lalitavistara, the Buddhacarita, the Mahavastu and some other sources. The predominant role of the Nidanakatha is also underscored by Buddha's hairstyle, since it clearly reflects the description this particular text gives of it. Only 60 of these sequences are also found in the Tipitaka, although often in an altered or very shortened form. Still, 292 sequences are not found in the four texts mentioned above. So they have been taken from other sources or inspired by the creativity of the film producers. Nonetheless, the impact of these four works is considerable. So the conclusion is justified that BUDDHA presents an image of the Enlightened One that is closest to later Buddhist tradition in which he has become a person who is simultaneously divine and human or, more than that, a being who transcends even the deities, since he is also worshipped by the gods.

Although it is impossible to make a similar analysis of TATHAGATA BUDDHA, it is possible to give some indication. It is clear that this biopic basically follows the story line of the Buddhacarita, also in the part of Buddha's life after his enlightenment. Many events related in the Buddhacarita are depicted in the movie. Nonetheless, the film presents more, since the story about Angulimala is absent in the Buddhacarita, but there are also events included in the Buddhacarita that are missing in the feature, such as the stories about Devadatta's attempts to kill Buddha (Schotsman; Olivelle: 417–431). But aside from its depiction of Buddha's enlightenment, the film does not include any supernatural aspects.

It is remarkable that the Four Noble Truths as well as the Eightfold Path, which can be considered to be the core of Buddha's teachings are completely absent from all first three movies, THE LIGHT OF ASIA, THE LITTLE BUDDHA and BUDDHA. Unfortunately, it was impossible to find out whether TATHAGATA BUDDHA included these teachings. Nonetheless, it is as if the three first pictures of the present chapter narrate the life story of Jesus while omitting completely the Sermon of the Mount as well as other episodes in which he teaches. This emphasizes the fact that none of these movies was truly interested in the ascetic side of Buddhism, which is underscored even more by the fact that they also do not deal with the life of the Awakened One after he has attained enlightenment. They are interested in his youth, his struggle for enlightenment and deliverance from the curse of suffering, but not in the many years he spent preaching his message and guiding a community of monks and nuns. It seems that the films wished to tell first and foremost the story of a hero who defeated the forces of evil after a fierce battle, whereas THE LIGHT OF ASIA embedded the hero story into a love story. The end was not the victory won by the hero, but his reunion with his beloved.

Before we come to our final conclusions, we must look at the attitude of Buddhists towards depicting Buddha in film.

3. Resistance to Depicting Buddha in Film

Section 2.1 already showed that it was more than 400 years before Buddha was depicted in anthropomorphic images. So there was a certain resistance to representing him in pictures, but in the course of the first century CE this resistance seems to be overcome, since images of Buddha are found in all Buddhist countries today and in the houses and institutions of almost all Buddhist groups.

Remarkably enough, however, Rachel Dwyer reveals that 'films showing the Buddha in human form were banned in Buddhist parts of Southeast Asia, so *The Light of Asia* was banned 'in Ceylon and also the Malay states' (Dwyer 2006a: 28). It is obvious that there is still resistance to a cinematic representation of Buddha. The first parts of the present chapter already revealed that most Buddha films were produced by non-Buddhists. The Buddhists themselves seemed to be reluctant. Nonetheless, Buddha films were released in Japan and Korea, two countries that have large Buddhist populations. It is not clear, however, if

the Japanese and Korean filmmakers were Buddhists themselves, and the Korean film is said to have been intended primarily as a historical film. Nevertheless it is remarkable that no new Buddha film was produced by a Buddhist or with the support of important Buddhists after 1964. Indeed, a new film of Buddha has been announced on the internet for a couple of years already. The Dutch version of *Wikipedia*, the internet encyclopaedia, reports that Shekar Kapoor announced in 2004 that he planned to produce a film about Buddha based on the book *Old Path, White Clouds* by Thich Nhat Hanh. Western film actors, such as Sharon Stone and Richard Gere, promised to play minor roles in the picture. The Dalai Lama announced his support of the initiative while B.K. Modi, president of the Maha Bodhi Society, the worldwide umbrella organization of Buddhists, promised to finance the production (Website of the Dutch *Wikipedia*). Although it was announced time and again that auditions are to be held shortly, nothing has happened. The authority of the Dalai Lama and the president of the Maha Bodhi Society seem to lack the strength to overcome resistance among their fellow Buddhists.

Therefore the conclusion is justified that, with regard to a cinematic representation of the Enlightened One, Buddhism has returned to its attitude of the first four centuries after Buddha's decease. The resistance to filming the Buddha will, however, not come as a surprise to those well acquainted with Buddhism. In the Vinaya Pitaka, which is also part of the Tipitaka, Buddha already forbade his monks to go and watch dancing, singing and music (Cullavagga 5,2,6).[46] The word for dance very probably includes drama here (Sharma: 28–29). So Buddha himself seemed to have some resistance to the dramatic arts, although there are also legends that he asked a group of actors to play for him or that he himself directed a play. The prohibition for monks makes it very improbable that these narratives are true. Lay people were allowed to play and see drama (Cullavagga 5,2,6),[47] whereas the Buddhist kings patronized and promoted drama, although this was usually Hindu drama for their Hindu subjects (Sarachchandra: 13–15). Nonetheless, since the first century CE theatre plays were used as means to teach Buddhist ideas and wisdom in later Mahayana Buddhism. In particular, the *Jataka* stories about Buddha's former lives were very popular, but

[46] Horner 1963: 145. See also Schumann: 235.
[47] Horner 1963: 145.

there was a taboo against depicting Buddha himself (Sarachchandra: 1–24; Sharma: 35–43). Among Tibetan Buddhists in India this taboo seems to have been undermined in recent years, since Buddhist monks performed a play in 2002 in which one of them played the role of Buddha.[48] It is possible therefore that Buddhists will follow the Christians in their attitude towards filming Buddha.

4. Thanks to the Hindus and the Westerners

The history of the Buddha film started in India, where Dada Saheb Phalke released the first picture representing the Enlightened One. It was a mythological to be followed, however, by a probably[49] completely different movie, The Light of Asia. Although the script of this picture was written by an Indian, the actors were Indians and the film was shot in India as well, The Light of Asia was meant for a Western audience. It was in Europe that the movie met its greatest successes. The film claimed to be inspired by Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, but in fact the content deviated greatly from Arnold's poem. Only some texts intersecting the movie were derived from or inspired by Arnold's work. Since it represented Buddha as a human being who did not perform any miracle, its image of the Awakened One was largely in agreement with the depiction of Buddha in the oldest Buddhist tradition. Only the divine voice calling him to leave the court and the scenes about Devadatta have their roots in later texts. The cause of the success of Franz Osten's picture was probably that is was moulded as a love story. It was predominantly a romantic film about a sage with deep insights.

Although more Buddha films were released in Japan and Korea in the meantime, it was not until 1993 that the next truly successful picture of the Enlightened One premiered: Bernardo Bertolucci's Little Buddha. This picture intertwined the life story of Buddha with another story about an American boy who was supposed to be a reincarnation of a great Tibetan *lama*. The Little Buddha is a feel-good film depicting the Awakened One as a compassionate man struggling for

[48] Personal communication by Thessa Ploos van Amstel who saw the play, 12 May, 2004.

[49] 'Probably' because all copies of Phalke's movie are lost, so it was impossible to watch the movie.

a decisive insight through which modern people are able to bear the suffering of life and can find rest in the conviction that ultimately one's personal attainments will remain. Although the image of Buddha is coloured by the material presented in the oldest sources of Buddhism, the influence of later sources, and in particular of Tibetan Buddhism, is evident. Buddha is a human being who accepts the challenge to lift the curse of being born and dying again and again, but on his way to enlightenment he acquires supernatural qualities. So far, this is in agreement with the oldest Buddhist traditions, but the representation of his last meditation as a fight against Mara corresponds with the content of later texts, while the explanation that he finds compassion in his experience of enlightenment originates in Tibetan tradition. The film, in fact, shows that Buddha already felt compassion when he was confronted with suffering. Out of solidarity with other sentient beings he decides to strive for enlightenment.

The third film, Sheshagiri Rao's BUDDHA, is a completely different picture. It is a serial deriving almost half of its content from the Nidanakatha, Lalitavistara, Mahavastu and Buddhacarita. Consequently, its image of Buddha is more in agreement with these sources. The Awakened One is a person who is simultaneously divine and human, his most important act being the defeat of Mara, the king of evil, whereas he is worshipped by the gods as someone transcending them. At the same time, the Hindu background of the Enlightened One is emphasized. As a consequence, Buddha threatens to become a person who could also have been one of Vishnu's *avatara*s who also descended on the earth to vanquish evil.

The last film, TATHAGATA BUDDHA, which was produced by K. Raja Sekhar, differs completely form the three earlier ones, since it also pays attention to Buddha's life after his enlightenment. In its presentation of the life of the Enlightened One the film basically follows the narrative of the Buddhacarita, although any divine presence or intervention is missing. The Awakened One is nothing more than a human being playing a prominent role in human history.

It is remarkable that none of the first three movies includes the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path, nor do any of them depict Buddha's life after he has attained enlightenment. It seems that they wanted first and foremost to tell the story of a hero who subdued the forces of evil after a fierce battle. THE LIGHT OF ASIA is something of an exception here, since it embeds the heroic legend in a love story.

Finally, it may be concluded that it is very questionable whether there would have been any successful Buddha film if Hindus and Westerners had refrained from producing them. In the 1950s and 1960s Japanese and Korean films were released, but they did not become international successes. In comparison to the films about Jesus and Rama, the number of Buddha films is significantly smaller. This, combined with the resistance felt in Buddhist countries to movies about the Enlightened One, underscores again how much Buddhists, in their hesitation regarding films of the great figure who inspired them, resemble the many Christians who have the same attitude. There are adherents of another religion who share this hesitation completely: the Muslims. The next chapter will focus on them.

CHAPTER FIVE

MUHAMMAD

The first and, until now, only feature-length film about the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, premiered in London on 29 July 1976. The film has two titles: Muhammad, Messenger of God and The Message. The first is the original title, but it was rejected by some *ulama*, so another name was chosen.[1] Three weeks later the Arabic version of the film, called Al-Risalah (The Message), was released in another London cinema. Both versions ran until 29 September 1976 (*Observer Review*: August 1, 1976; August 22, 1976; October 3, 1976). Because of the opposition it aroused, the film was not shown in many cinemas but can be seen on video or DVD, and the main European broadcasting companies occasionally show it on television. Although the film has been reviewed in some popular cinema magazines, it has not received much academic attention. I have traced one article that discusses it briefly (Hasenberg 2002: 42) as an illustration of the problems film raises for some religious groups. The only other academic article devoted to this motion picture does present a complete analysis. It is written by the present author and was published in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* in 2006.[2]

This chapter will discuss the film and compare its portrayal of Muhammad with the portrait of the Prophet in Muslim tradition and with what is offered in modern biographies of Muhammad. It will subsequently look at the pictorial images of the Apostle and conclude with an analysis of the attitude of the Muslims towards representing the Prophet in images and film.

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[1] Personal communication by Ghassan Ascha, 24 September 2004 (see also Pym: 187).

[2] 'The Image of Muhammad in The Message, the First and Only Feature Film about the Prophet of Islam', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17/1: 77–92. The present chapter is a revised and elaborated version of this article.

1. The Film Itself

Prelude

The production of a feature film about Muhammad will always run into difficulty, not least because of Arabic culture and the Islamic religion. Islam prohibits the depiction of creatures. Although—remarkably enough—photographic images have been readily accepted in Muslim countries, the legal scholars of al-Azhar University in Cairo protested in 1927 when the actor and director Yusuf Wahba announced that he would play the role of the Prophet on-screen. In 1930 they objected again, and this resulted in a general prohibition against the portrayal of Muhammad, which is still in force (Shafik: 48–49). Photographs and films, however, have been accepted since they are regarded as signs and not as creations. Muslims see a photograph as a pattern and thus not as something that gives things a soul. Photographs and films are comparable to shadows—they reinforce the power of God rather than compete with it, since they are nothing but a combination of light and shadow presenting God's creation without changing it (Shafik: 49).

During the 1930s an enormous film industry emerged in Egypt, which continued to develop after World War Two and is currently one of the foremost film industries in the world. At the end of the 1950s the film industry of Lebanon also became important and remained so until civil war broke out in 1975 (Shafik: 2).

The film Jesus Christ Superstar premiered in 1973; it was shown in countless cinemas all over the world and made a deep impression on audiences. Of course, this did not remain unnoticed by Muslims and an initiative to produce a similar film about Muhammad followed. This met with a great deal of opposition, however. Rumour had it that the role of Muhammad would be played by Charlton Heston, who had played Moses in The Ten Commandments, the film released by Cecil B. DeMille in 1956. The producer and director, Moustapha Akkad (1935–2005), a Syrian residing in the United States who had not made any other films previously, asked a group of Muslim religious scholars at Cairo's al-Azhar University to approve every page of the screenplay. The members of the Shi'ite Council of Lebanon also gave the film their approval. The solution Akkad had found was that the Prophet himself would not appear on-screen at all. Only his staff and camel would be visible. Akkad decided to focus the film on Muhammad's uncle Hamza.

However, after production started in 1974, the Muslim scholars changed their minds and condemned the whole enterprise. In the meantime, a massive set representing Mecca had been constructed in Morocco. King Faisal (1906–1975) of Saudi Arabia pressured Morocco's King Hassan II (1929–1999) into expelling the filmmakers, using the excuse that the very realistic set of Mecca might confuse true believers travelling to pray in the Holy City and cause them to venture into the bogus Mecca by mistake. Left without a set or a country in which to shoot, Akkad turned to Muammar Qaddafi (b. 1942), the ruler of Libya, who was eager to sponsor the film and provided locations in his country. Akkad tried to finish the scenes that took place in Mecca in the replica set in Morocco before leaving for Libya to shoot the rest of the film there. A consequence of this forced move was that segments of the Libyan army participated in the film's battle scenes (*Motion Picture Guide*: 2004; Pym: 187; Rosseels: 8; Samuelson: 906, 926).

The problems were not yet over, however. When the film was scheduled to premiere in the United States, Black Muslim militants occupied the Washington DC building of the Jewish B'nai B'rith organization and held its employees hostage, threatening to kill everyone unless the American premiere of the film was cancelled (*Motion Picture Guide*: 2004; Samuelson: 906, 926; Website *Cinema e Medioevo-Locandine e Schede*).

As noted above, two versions were produced, one in English with prominent actors like Anthony Quinn (1915–2001), Irene Papas (b. 1926) and Michael Ansara (b. 1922), and one in Arabic with actors of equivalent standing in the Egyptian film world. During the production the sequences were shot in succession. The Arabic dialogues took more time and required more movement since the texts are spoken in classical Arabic, so the Arabic film is about 16 minutes longer than the English (Rosseels: 8–9; Samuelson: 906–907).[3]

The Azhari scholars prohibited not only the depiction of the Prophet but also that of his wives and children, including his son-in-law Ali (Rosseels: 8). Therefore, only Ali's sword is visible—once when he is

[3] Rosseels asserts that the Arabic version is 30 minutes longer (Rosseels: 8). However, the present author also saw this version, AL-RISALAH, and it was only 16 minutes longer than the English one.

fighting as a champion in single combat before the battle of Badr. We will see that these restrictions had far-reaching consequences for the portrayal of Muhammad in the film. Nevertheless, Akkad did succeed in making a film about which the reviewer of *Variety* wrote:

> But what lingers, along with the message of the Koran, are Jack Hildyard's stunning photography, especially those Panavisioned and Eastman coloured desert vistas, and Maurice Jarre's scoring which is melodically powerful without overpowering. Technically, in every department, the film is impressive. (*Variety Film Reviews*: 18 August 1976)[4]

It has also been commented that, although the motion picture is a US $17,000,000 extravaganza using masses of actors (*Variety Film Reviews*, 18 August 1976),[5] the more intimate scenes are the most impressive (Rosseels: 8).

Cinematic Context

As we have seen, the production of THE MESSAGE was at least partly motivated by the success of JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR in 1973. Thus, there is a clear relationship between the film about Muhammad and films about Jesus. Discussing religious films in Arabic, Viola Shafik writes: 'As in some Western films on early Christianity, the believer is denied a contradictory and aggressive nature and transfigured into a righteous saint' (Shafik: 171). She later underscores this and asserts: '[The early Muslims] are hardly depicted as individuals but entirely transfigured into unworldly saints and furnished with a martyr-like aura similar to the image of the tortured Jesus Christ' (Shafik: 172). In her view this is reinforced by the costumes. 'In contrast to the vicious pagans, early Muslims generally appear in white gowns' (Shafik: 172). Whoever has seen THE MESSAGE can only confirm these statements, since they are true of many sequences in this film about Muhammad. Shafik makes it clear that films about the early Muslims follow the pattern of the films about Jesus and the early Christians, and THE MESSAGE clearly stands in the same cinematic tradition. The only difference is that, although many prominent Christian theologians, in particular Protestants, were against portraying Jesus Christ in films, Christian authorities never went so far as to issue a complete prohibition of any representation of him. And later, when they discovered

[4] Maria Rosseels gives a similar comment (Rosseels: 8–9).
[5] US $17,000,000 was a huge amount at the time.

the advantages of the new medium, they even changed their attitude.[6] So filmmakers had never before decided to take such radical steps as Moustapha Akkad did, and even then Akkad was still subjected to a great deal of criticism.

An Analytical Impression

The film starts with three men on horseback who then go off in three directions. Each proclaims a message at one of the most important courts in the Middle East at that time. One rider goes to the court of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, another to the domicile of Cyrus, the Patriarch of Alexandria,[7] while the third travels to the palace of the Persian king Chosroes.[8] All proclaim the same message, i.e. that there is one God and Muhammad is his messenger, and they exhort every ruler to acknowledge this claim. The patriarch's response is not shown. The two worldly rulers, however, respond differently. The emperor asks who it was that made Muhammad a prophet, and although the answer is 'God Himself', he does not convert to Islam. Nonetheless, he keeps the possibility open that the message may be true, for John the Baptist also came from the desert. The king of Persia, however, asserts that he himself is the one whom the desert people should adore and that they should follow his religion. He then rips up the parchment containing the proclamation. The message of the sequence is clear: Muhammad is recognized as a prophet by at least one prominent Christian leader. The importance of the opening sequence is emphasized by the fact that this scene is the only one shown twice in the film.

The second time the sequence is shown, the message, which has now been proclaimed in Arabia too, is extended by the statement that all people are equal before God, that everyone must love his neighbour as himself and take care of others. Further, it is said that it is better to

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[6] See Chapter Two.

[7] In the film he is called by his Arabic title *al-Muqawqis*. In 1956 W. Montgomery Watt wrote that 'there is difficulty about the identification of the Muqawqis' (Watt 1956: 346). In fact, there were two patriarchs in Alexandria at the time, the Coptic and the Melkite (Websites *Catholic Encylopedia* and *Popes and Patriarchs of Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, etc.*). According to Philip K. Hitti, the Muslim tradition refers to the Melkite Patriarch Cyrus, who had been installed in Alexandria by Emperor Heraclius after his reoccupation of Egypt in 630. He also functioned as the imperial representative in the civil administration of Egypt. The Coptic patriarch, Andronikos, who occupied the see from 619 till 665, was merely the head of his own church in Egypt (Hitti: 161).

[8] In the film he is called Kisra.

respect the ink of scholars than their blood and to respect Jews and Christians. It is also emphasized that Muhammad is just an ordinary man. The inclusion of Jews here is remarkable. The positive attitude of the Christian rulers is also visible in the passage about the followers of Muhammad who fled to Abyssinia. Despite the statements of the Meccan envoys that these refugees were 'rebels in religion', the Abyssinian ruler offers them hospitality on the basis of their declaration that they also believe in the God of the prophets and Jesus. Listening to the words of the refugees, the king concludes that what Christ says and what Muhammad says are like two rays from the same lamp. Then the refugees quote the Qur'an, Sura 19,16–18, which relates how God created Jesus in the womb of Mary. After consulting with the Christian theologians present at the court the king draws a line on the floor and declares: 'The difference between us and you is not bigger than this line.' They thus receive his protection. It is clear that the filmmakers wished to extend the hand of friendship to the Christians in the audience.

The scene of Muhammad's call is very impressive. This follows almost immediately after the sequence with the three messengers and an introduction to the leading persons of Mecca's elite, the most prominent among them being Abu Sufyan and his wife Hind. Abu Sufyan develops into one of the most important opponents of the Prophet, but at the same time he tries to exercise restraint by not getting involved in futile attacks on Muhammad and his followers that would harm his own position and his wealth. His decision to join the Prophet in the end forms the prelude to the final victory of Muhammad over Mecca.

The beginning of the scene of the Apostle's call makes it obvious that Muhammad's frequent retreats to the caves in the mountains around Mecca are already known in the city. The film shows some unrest among leading Meccans. Abu Talib, one of Muhammad's uncles, is also worried because Muhammad has been away in the mountains for three days. He states significantly: 'Men see the world too well from a mountain.' After this introduction, the screen darkens and a voice says: 'Muhammad, read, in the name of Thy Lord who created man from a sensitive drop of blood, who teaches man what he knows not, read', followed by a recitation of Sura 96,1–5. A flame appears, which turns out to belong to the candle of Zayd, Muhammad's adopted son. He relates to a group of followers of Muhammad and to Abu Talib what occurred in the cave, and Abu Talib concludes that his nephew met the angel Gabriel. Then Muhammad's first followers are mentioned:

his cousin Ali, his wife Khadija, his friend Abu Bakr and Zayd. Abu Talib recalls Moses' call at the burning bush and promises to protect his nephew. His promise is very important, since from that moment on the leading families of Mecca will do their utmost to persuade Muhammad to renounce his mission as a prophet of the one and only God. They fear that this message will harm their businesses, since they profit by Mecca's important position as a pilgrimage centre.

It is a beautiful sequence, but it also demonstrates the effects of the prohibitions by al-Azhar. Muhammad is neither seen nor heard. It is Zayd, his adopted son, who acts as his spokesman, as throughout the film other people act as the Apostle's spokesmen, the most important of whom is his uncle Hamza and the first black Muslim, Bilal. Muhammad's wife Khadija is not shown nor is his cousin Ali, although, remarkably enough, the voice of the angel Gabriel seems to be heard the moment Muhammad receives his call.

The consequences of these restrictions are far-reaching, but, despite being neither visible nor audible on the screen, Muhammad dominates the film, even though the filmmakers had to make use of spokesmen in order to comply with the prohibition against the Prophet's voice being heard.

The fidelity of the film to Muslim historical tradition has been noted, but the artistic restrictions make some deviations inevitable. In the battle of Badr, for example, the audience gets the impression that the Muslim warriors are led by Hamza, whereas Ibn Ishaq's (d. 768) *Sirat Rasul Allah* (biography of the Messenger of God), one of the main sources of Muslim tradition, states that it was Muhammad himself who commanded them (Guillaume: 299–304).

Moreover, as a few reviewers have observed, the viewers 'become' Muhammad, since they see large parts of the film through the Prophet's eyes (Davies: 19; Pym: 187–188; *Variety Film Reviews*, 18 August 1976). At various times they look individuals who speak to the Apostle straight in the eye. Russell Davies, the reviewer for *The Observer*, remarks that this, 'while very flattering, [is] possibly even more blasphemous than having an actor impersonate him' (Davies: 19). It seems that this was one of the reasons the Muslim scholars later withdrew their permission for production of the film.

A third consequence of the restrictions is that there are very few women in the film, especially not around Muhammad. Muhammad's own wives are not even mentioned, with the exception of Khadija, who

is referred to twice: once as one of Muhammad's first followers, as we have seen, and again when the audience are informed that she has died. There are women visible in the film, both among the followers of Muhammad and among the Meccans, but when women who follow the Prophet are shown, they are kept in the background and are shown mostly in situations where they are victims of the raids of Muhammad's opponents. With respect to the Meccans, Hind, Abu Sufyan's wife, is often in the foreground. As Muhammad's staunchest opponent, she is one of the main characters in the film. Meccan women also appear as dancers. As already stated, the consequences are far-reaching, since the impression almost inevitably arises that Muhammad lived almost without women around him, as if he were a celibate Catholic priest, whereas his real life was entirely different. Muslim tradition contains many stories about his wives and the intricacies of his relationships with them.

The scene of the call also refers to the affinity between Islam and Christianity and in this case even includes the Jews. When Abu Talib hears about Muhammad's call he brings to mind Moses's call at the burning bush. And when Muhammad gives his first sermon after arriving in Medina it is emphasized that the Jews are equal to the other inhabitants of the city. No mention is made in the remainder of the film of the continuously widening gap between Muhammad and the Jews during the time the Prophet lived in Medina. Nevertheless, no Jews figure in the film, whereas at least two Christian rulers appear in The Message.

From the beginning of Muhammad's appearance as a prophet, he preaches equality among all people, which is illustrated by a scene in which this is proclaimed by Amr, one of his followers. One of the leading Meccans orders his black slave, Bilal, to whip Amr, but Bilal refuses to do so. As a consequence, Bilal himself is whipped and is about to be executed by being crushed by a heavy stone when Abu Bakr arrives to buy his freedom, thereby saving his life. In subsequent scenes Bilal develops into one of the most prominent Muslims, thus proving that the Prophet is serious in his message of equality for all people.

After his arrival in Medina, Muhammad delivers a proclamation announcing again that all people are equal. Even Jews, slaves and women are equal to all other human beings. This declaration causes displeasure in Mecca, and Abu Sufyan warns that they will shortly even have to kiss their slaves.

Although equality of all people is very important according to the film, it is not the Apostle's only concern. Before the battle of Badr, from which the Muslims emerged victorious, Muhammad is hesitant. His followers wish to fight because they are angry. The Meccan elite have confiscated all the houses, shops and other property of the Muslims who had left to go to Medina. But the Prophet refuses to give his consent. He says: 'They are led by greed, we are led by God.' It is only after a revelation from God permitting his followers to take up arms that Muhammad gives in, but even then he emphasizes that the Muslims must fight in accordance with the ways of God. Self-defence is allowed, but when the enemy stops fighting or flees, they are to stop fighting. God never permits them to initiate a fight.

With these guidelines the Muslims move to Badr and during their march Bilal adds some more. They are not allowed to harm women and children, cripples or men working in the field. They can fight only those who have confiscated their houses, shops and other possessions. Then Hamza calls them to go to the wells of Badr.

The night before the battle the Meccans spend their time drinking while beautiful women dance. The next morning they appear on the battlefield in coloured costumes, whereas the Muslims wear white garments, a fact that recalls Viola Shafik's remark quoted earlier in this chapter: 'In contrast to the vicious pagans, early Muslims generally appear in white gowns.' The Message thus portrays the battle of Badr not first and foremost as a military engagement but as a religious and moral one. It was a struggle between people who believe in God and therefore follow his Prophet and the rules he proclaimed on the one hand and people steeped in immoral ways of life on the other. So, it is no surprise that the Muslims afterwards ascribed the victory of Badr to God. At the end of the film the message of the equality of all people returns with a new emphasis, but before we go on to the conclusion of The Message, attention must be paid to the conversion of Abu Sufyan, which happens just before Muhammad's victorious entry into Mecca. The screen shows a red sky with the text: 'Victory to victory in the hearts of men'. In other words, Muhammad is not interested in a victory on the battlefield but only in victory in the hearts of human beings.

Images are subsequently shown of the first pilgrimage Muhammad's followers make to the Ka'ba. After the pilgrimage Abu Sufyan visits Medina, looking for Muhammad, but the Prophet refuses to meet him. He accuses Abu Sufyan of breaking the truce they made earlier for a

ten-year armistice, while at the same time permitting the Muslims to make a pilgrimage to Mecca's Ka'ba. Allies of the Meccans have attacked allies of the Muslims. Khalid, one of the prominent Meccans who has become a Muslim, advises Abu Sufyan to return to organize Mecca's surrender.

After Abu Sufyan's departure, the Muslims prepare to attack Mecca and advance on the city with 10,000 men. The Meccans are very afraid, particularly of being plundered, and Abu Sufyan goes to Muhammad prepared to surrender. He says: 'I know what power you put into your men; we can no longer resist them', but he balks at becoming a Muslim. Bilal says that there is no compulsion in religion. Abu Sufyan shakes hands with Bilal and declares that he has discovered that the gods of Mecca have not been of any use and therefore he can attest 'under no compulsion' that there is one God and that Muhammad is his messenger. He then leaves immediately.

The next morning the Meccans are nervously awaiting what will happen. The Muslims arrive and, as they move into the city, they shout 'Allahu akbar' continuously. Many of them greet their relatives and friends gladly. Meanwhile, Bilal officially declares that looting is not permitted. Hind stands beside Abu Sufyan; she is surprised and says that Muhammad has kept his word by not forcing the city gates. Her husband replies: 'He stones hearts not walls.'

A high point in the film is Muhammad's entrance into the Ka'ba. The sanctuary is cleansed of the images of the gods and then Bilal climbs onto the roof and cries out the call to prayer, as he was accustomed to do in Medina. All the Muslims present prostrate themselves with their faces turned towards the Ka'ba. A voice says that Muhammad took no revenge and that he declared that in the future Mecca would be a holy place where it would be unlawful to shed blood, cut down a tree or kill any living thing.

Then comes the announcement that Muhammad expects that he will die soon and so wishes to say a final word and to preach surrender to God again as well as humane behaviour towards other people. The Prophet emphasizes that the Muslims must feed and clothe the weak because they will meet their God who will hold them to account for their actions.

A voice relates that Muhammad died on 8 June 1632. After his death, Abu Bakr says: 'If anyone worships Muhammad, let him know that Muhammad is dead, but he who worships God, let him know that God

is alive and cannot die.' A voice continues with the words: 'Muhammad was buried in Medina beside his mosque… but the religion he preached found its place in the hearts of men. It endured, it multiplied. Still to Mecca they come dressed in their pilgrim white, all equal before God, all joined in one community.' The film closes with images of Muslims praying in mosques all over the world.

Both Abu Sufyan's declaration that Muhammad stones hearts rather than walls and the last sentences of THE MESSAGE, which stress that the religion of Muhammad found a place in human hearts, make clear that the film's ultimate goal is conversion—but to a form of Islam that shows a remarkable affinity with Christianity, since many proverbs of Muhammad sound very familiar to Christian ears. The film stresses equality between men and women, free men and slaves. The rich have to care for the poor, not exploit them. We are to love our neighbours as ourselves. In the dialogue between the refugees and the king of Abyssinia, the followers of Muhammad explain that they follow the same prophets, including Jesus, and that they too believe in his virgin birth. The film pays attention to the similarities between Islam and Christianity.

More Recent Decisions by Muslim Legal Scholars

Interestingly enough, the procedure followed by Moustapha Akkad was copied by the producers of MUHAMMAD, THE LAST PROPHET, a new animated film about Muhammad released in the United States on 14 November 2004. This film was the initiative of Christine Huda Dodge, an American woman of Irish background and an educationalist, who became a Muslim in 1989. Permission to produce this film was granted by the Muslim scholars of al-Azhar and the Shi'ite Council of Lebanon on 16 October 2002 (Website *About.com*), the same institutions that initially gave Akkad permission. After almost 30 years these two Muslim authorities regard Akkad's procedure, in spite of its disadvantage of putting the audience in Muhammad's position, as a valuable way to make animated films, at least, about the Prophet.

On 26 December 2004, however, the decision of the *ulama* seemed to have been reversed. According to the Palestinian newspaper *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, the legal scholars of al-Azhar declared that THE MESSAGE was not allowed to be screened in any cinema on Egyptian territory, or to be broadcast by any television company transmitting from Egyptian soil. They asserted that it was forbidden to depict any of the ten *sahaba*, the

Prophet's Companions,[9] in a film. This decision was clearly meant as a deathblow to Akkad's film, because at least one of them, Abu Bakr, appears in it (Website *al-Rai*).

Three points must be made here. First, although the scholars of al-Azhar and the Lebanese Shi'ite Council later withdrew the permission they had initially given to Akkad, the fact that they did initially give permission shows that in their view the lifting of the prohibition against depicting the Prophet and making a film about him was not entirely inconceivable. The continuing availability of videos and DVDs of THE MESSAGE also makes it apparent that the second decision to forbid this film about Muhammad was not absolute. The attitude of prominent Muslims in Cameroon is another illustration of the limited authority of al-Azhar. When a colleague of mine visited the Yaoundé in March 2006, he met with a group of *imams* at the court of Sultan Noujya of Foumban. They were very positive about THE MESSAGE. At the same time French DVDs of the picture were sold everywhere in the Muslim quarters of the city, even—although illegally—in the annexes of Yaoundé's principal mosque.[10] It is clear that THE MESSAGE is used for the propagation of Islam even with the support of prominent Muslims in the country.

Second, now that the pictorial culture of television, computer and cinema is advancing and a growing number of people are living in this culture and are completely influenced by it, many feel that it is becoming increasingly important to make use of these modern media, especially if one wishes to reach young people. This also holds true, of course, for spreading information about the Prophet. The use of modern media, however, raises new issues unfamiliar to many Muslims but not to American Muslims, particularly those with a Western background. Therefore, it is no surprise that they were the first to try it again. In other words, like Christian religious authorities, Muslims are also, however reluctantly, compelled to give way to advances in modern communication media and to their fellow believers who are looking for acceptable means for using them.

Third, the reason that Muslim scholars gave permission for the screening of MUHAMMAD, THE LAST PROPHET may be that animation

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[9] For a list of the names of the ten Companions see the website *Way to Truth*. There is some variety in the names given in different sources, although the four rightly-guided caliphs, of whom Abu Bakr is the first, are always included.

[10] E-mail sent by Gerard van 't Spijker, 23 November 2006.

has greater distance from reality than a film with real human beings. But, as far as I know, the *ulama* have never explained why they permitted the showing of the animated film and prohibited THE MESSAGE. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the decision will have much influence, since the previous prohibition of the film proved to be unsuccessful. It is not clear why these *ulama* made this new announcement nearly 30 years after their earlier prohibition. Akkad had decided to take the matter to court to prevent people from thinking that the motion picture opposes Islam (Website *al-Rai*) but died, unfortunately, before he succeeded.

2. THE FILM'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE MUSLIM TRADITION

The Oldest Sources

The main source of the Muslim tradition about the life of Muhammad is Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*. This biography, however, is often referred to as the Sira of Ibn Hisham (d. 833), although W. Montgomery Watt writes that the Sira of Ibn Hisham is perhaps best described as an edition of the Sira of Ibn Ishaq:

> Ibn Ishaq collected nearly all the available information, including old poems, and so ordered and selected his material that he produced a coherent story. Frequently he gives references to his sources in the usual Islamic manner. Ibn Hisham added a few explanatory notes. (Watt 1953: xii)

The structure of Ibn Ishaq's book is entirely different from that of the film: the book starts with a genealogy in which much is said about the ancestors of Muhammad, which includes many biblical figures (Raven: 23, note 1). This is followed by traditions from the pre-Islamic era, after which it presents stories about Muhammad's childhood and early manhood. This part also includes Jewish and Christian predictions of Muhammad's coming (cf. Wansbrough: 39–49) and the Gospel's prophecy in John 15:23–16:1 that 'the Comforter' will be sent (cf. Guillaume: 103–104), with whom Muslims identify Muhammad. The following section narrates the story of Muhammad's call and preaching in Mecca, and the last part covers Muhammad's migration to Medina, his wars and triumph and his death.

It is obvious that THE MESSAGE could not include everything in the tradition—a selection was inevitable. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see what is omitted and what has been included in the film, since this will provide a clearer view of its intention.

It becomes immediately clear that the film omits everything prior to Muhammad's call and the prophecies about him. The period covering Muhammad's life in Mecca, the support offered by the Muslims in Abyssinia to help the Abyssinian king regain his throne, Muhammad's temporary concession to polytheism, the acceptance of Islam by some Christians, and Muhammad's night journey and ascent to heaven, are all left out. The part on the life of the Prophet after his migration to Medina omits the growing alienation between Muhammad and the Jews, which ultimately led to the killing of 600 Jewish men, as well as his many raids, the battle of the ditch, the scandals concerning his wives, and the many deputations he received from all over Arabia. It also leaves out all the situations in which the Prophet said 'Who will deal with this rascal for me?' after which one of his followers went out to kill the person the Prophet had mentioned (cf. Guillaume: 675–676). The film also declares that Muhammad took no revenge after conquering Mecca, even though it is a fact that a few people were killed. In most cases, this was because of crimes they had committed previously, but among them were also two singing girls and their friend. Their only crime had been that they used to sing satirical songs about the Prophet (Guillaume: 550–551). The film refers, of course, to the fact that Muhammad instructed his commanders to act mercifully and not to take any revenge, but in a way that suggests that nobody was killed, which was not the case. The film therefore presents a less violent image of the Prophet than is to be found in Muslim tradition itself, again a remarkable fact.

The difference between the impression The Message conveys of the way the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, the Alexandrian Patriarch Cyrus and the Persian King Chosroes deal with the message they receive from the envoys of the Prophet and the picture delineated in Muslim tradition is also remarkable and illustrates how the filmmakers translated the story they found in tradition into scenes acceptable to modern audiences. We have already described how two of these three prominent figures acted according to the film. It is true that the Muslim tradition does show that the emperor and the patriarch were more positive than Chosroes, but the details are totally different. The tradition relates that both Christians took the message seriously. The patriarch listens and 'then put [the message] between his thighs and his ribs' (Guillaume: 653, 655–656). The emperor also listens and even says: 'By God, he is truly the prophet whom we expect' (Guillaume: 656). Both react very positively but within the rules of diplomacy. The patriarch gives

Muhammad four slave girls (Guillaume: 653),[11] whereas the emperor decides to renounce Syria in order to offer it as a present to the new Prophet of God (Guillaume: 653–657).

According to tradition, Chosroes did indeed tear up the parchment of Muhammad's message, but, according to Muslim tradition, he was later punished by God. Within a year he was killed and his son succeeded him as king of Persia (Guillaume: 658–659).

The British Islamicist William Montgomery Watt (1909–2006) is of the opinion that Muhammad never sent envoys to these three figures, although he does not deny that the reports of sending envoys to other Arab princes and to the king of Abyssinia contain a kernel of truth. In his view, the passages about the envoys to the Byzantine ruler, the Alexandrian patriarch and the king of Persia are based on theological interest. They were meant to emphasize the allegedly positive attitude of prominent Christian officials towards the message of Muhammad, thus substantiating the claim that Muhammad was a prophet to all nations and not simply to the Arabs, which, according to Muslim tradition, met with recognition among the most prominent Christians in the region (Watt 1956: 345–346). It is true, however, that Chosroes was killed in 628 and succeeded by his son (Rodinson: 231).

The filmmakers supposed that their audiences were probably not prepared to accept the narratives in the Muslim tradition about these events, so they altered the stories, preserving a positive religious attitude in their new versions. Heraclius keeps the possibility open that Muhammad is a prophet like John the Baptist, thus suggesting that he may indeed be inspired by the same God the Christians worship. The filmmakers omitted any reference to the belief that Chosroes was punished by God, presumably sensing that this would not be accepted by a Western audience. Chapter One already explained that making films always means that one has to reckon with the feelings of the audience, for a film will not run very long in cinemas if the audience does not accept what it says.

Both Muslim tradition and the film emphasize the positive attitude of Christian officials towards the message of the Prophet, but they

[11] One of these slave girls, Mariya, later played a prominent role. Having become his concubine, she bore Muhammad's son, Ibrahim, who unfortunately died after 17 or 18 months. Muhammad was very fond of her (Watt 1956: 396; Rodinson: 241–245).

do differ. The Muslim tradition considers every positive statement or action an acceptance of Muhammad as God's messenger, whereas the film does not deny the possibility of some reservation, which, however slight, means that there was no direct and complete acceptance of Muhammad as a messenger of God. That acceptance remains merely a probability. This version, however, is already more conciliatory than many Christians expect from Muslims. So this makes THE MESSAGE something of an overture to Christians.

Modern Biographies of Muhammad

The producers of THE MESSAGE were not the first to try to adapt the stories about Muhammad in the Muslim tradition to make them acceptable to modern people. Others who made the same attempt were the authors of the modern biographies of Muhammad published in the Arab world since 1933, the most important of them being *Hayat Muhammad* (The Life of Muhammad) published by the Egyptian writer Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888–1956) in 1933. In 1972 the Dutch Islamic scholar, Antonie Wessels (b. 1937), published a study on modern biographies of Muhammad, including Haykal's. In his conclusions Wessels asserts that Haykal wished 'to give Muhammad back to Muslim youth, to project an image of him in which account was taken of the achievements of Western science and research' (Wessels: 248). Haykal presented, Wessels writes, 'a portrait of Muhammad which offered an example worthy of emulation in its ideal humanity, a model for both personal and married life, for both social and cultural activity' (Wessels: 248).

Wessels explains that Haykal had to make a case on two fronts—against the Western orientalists on the one hand and the all too rigid approaches of the Muslims on the other. The orientalists denied that they blindly followed the old critique the Christians put forward about the Prophet, in which he was said to be fond of violence and women. As orientalists, they tried to present a purely scientific picture of Muhammad, which according to their own assertions was not coloured by any prejudice. They often rejected the miracles that Muslim tradition claimed the Prophet had done. But they also had problems with his eroticism and violence, which did not comply with the high standard of morality they expected from a messenger of God. The Muslims, on the other hand, did not tolerate any deviation from the old tradition and were inclined to enhance the greatness of the Messenger of God by elaborating on his miracles (Wessels: 238–239, 247–248).

Haykal largely followed Muslim tradition, but omitted all miracles except the miracle of the text of the Qur'an itself. When two different readings, one miraculous and the other non-miraculous, were found in the tradition, he always opted for the non-miraculous. He modified sentences in which the tradition asserted that an angel or *jinn* (spirit) was speaking through a person by omitting the angel or the *jinn*. Haykal also tried to qualify Muhammad's attitude towards women with the explanation that he had first and foremost social or political, rather than erotic, motives for marrying his wives. Haykal did not deny that Muhammad occasionally used violence but portrays the Prophet as hating to use it. Thus Haykal presented a picture of a Muhammad 'who hated the use of violence, who waged only defensive wars, who knew practically no sin, who was perfect, who was an exemplary husband without any inclination to a strong love of women, who neither did nor could work miracles' (Wessels: 244).

Wessels suggests that Haykal achieves this by putting some facts in a false perspective through the use of omissions and shadings. Thus, one of the most elementary aspects of Muhammad's character, the religious dimension of his behaviour, was more or less underexposed (Wessels: 244). Wessels concludes therefore that al-Qasimi was not wrong in his claim that Haykal does more justice to Muhammad the statesman than to Muhammad the apostle (Wessels: 244).

It is interesting that, according to Wessels,

> One searches Haykal's work in vain for the tradition which speaks uninhibitedly of Muhammad's love for women. In order to establish the image of Muhammad as one who abhorred the use of violence, incidents are omitted in which Muhammad took the initiative in using violence. The examples of Muhammad's forgiving nature—such as the general pardon for Mecca—are not unjustly brought to the fore, but Muhammad's urging of the killing of his opponents is passed over in silence. (Wessels: 244–245)

The same is the case in The Message. So it may be reasonable to conclude that in general the film follows the same path as the modern biographies of the Prophet. There is only one important difference. Whereas a biography like Haykal's portrays Muhammad as an exemplary husband, in the film he appears to be celibate: the women around him have disappeared. It is certainly probable that this is not the result of the creativity of the filmmakers but of the rules announced by the Islamic scholars of al-Azhar and the Shi'ite Council of Lebanon, who

prohibited any depiction of Muhammad's wives as well as of the Prophet himself. The result, however, is that the film's portrayal of the Messenger of God more than ever meets the expectations Western Christians have of holy men. It is neither Islam nor Judaism, but Christianity—and Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism as well—that generally abhors the combination of holiness and sexuality.

When Haykal writes about the envoys sent by Muhammad to the Byzantine emperor, the king of Persia and the patriarch of Alexandria, he stresses that they were probably sent at intervals (Haykal: 364–365). Haykal reports on this topic in a chapter in which he also elaborates on the actions the Prophet had initiated against the Jews of Khaybar in order to eliminate Jewish influence in Arabia (Haykal: 366–373).

The three rulers respond differently. The response of the emperor, Heraclius, is gentle, which has caused some historians to suppose that he became a Muslim himself, but Haykal rejects this idea. Yet Heraclius prevents an attack against Muhammad by a neighbouring ruler (Haykal: 374–375), but he also declares at the same time that the emperor 'did not think' the message of the Prophet 'sufficiently worthy to deserve attention' (Haykal: 375). Chosroes reacts in the way related in the film, and Haykal explains that he died shortly afterwards (Haykal: 375–376), which is in accordance with Muslim tradition. The patriarch responds very positively. He sends two slave women and concurs with the idea that a prophet will come. But he does 'not convert to Islam because of his fear of discharge by his superior, and that were he not a man of authority and power, he would have been rightly guided to the true faith' (Haykal: 376–377).

So it is clear that The Message's account of what occurred differs from the account in Haykal's *Hayat Muhammad*. In the film Heraclius is the most positive; in Haykal's book it is the patriarch whose response is the most positive, but the film passes over his response. The film probably reflects the opinion of the historians, rejected by Haykal, which asserts that Heraclius became a Muslim. Haykal, on the other hand, attaches great value to the tradition that the Alexandrian church leader gave two slave women to the Prophet, seeing this as evidence that he really respected Muhammad. In a section after this episode Haykal explains that the kings were not interested in a spiritual message because of their materialism (Haykal: 377–379).

Although The Message and Haykal's biography give different versions of these events, their message is the same: whereas pagans crudely reject the message of the Prophet, some prominent Christians are open

to the possibility that the proclamation does indeed come from their own God. According to Haykal, many 'treacherous' Jews turn against the Apostle (Haykal: 366–373). As noted earlier, the film is silent about the attitude of the Jews.

Images of Muhammad

Remarkably enough, the prohibition against depicting creatures did not prevent images of the Prophet from being made in the Islamic world. It is well known that various Muslim rulers did not always heed the prescriptions of the *ulama*. Some of them assigned artists to make pictures of women whose beauty they admired or of some important predecessors. The painters of these pictures usually came from painting schools of Christian, Manichaean and Sassanid backgrounds, for the churches and palaces of these movements were full of paintings and needed these schools desperately (Arnold 1965: 16–19).

Moreover, in the Islamic world stories were told in a number of varieties that important Christians, such as Emperor Heraclius, possessed a series of portraits of biblical prophets and of Jesus, but also one of Muhammad, which according to most of these narrations was preserved in the last compartment. Of course, none of these portraits was made by Muslims. The function of the narratives seems to be that they proved that the Christians already knew that another prophet would come (Grabar: 19–28). At the same time, the tradition demonstrates that the attitude of the Muslims towards depicting Muhammad was more complicated than is often assumed.

It was not until the middle of the 13th century that Muhammad himself was depicted as well. The oldest picture is found in an illustrated Persian manuscript entitled *The Poem of Warqa and Gulsha* (Soucek: 194). Shortly afterwards the Prophet was depicted in at least four other manuscripts dating from the end of the 13th or the beginning of the 14th century. They are a so-called *Shah-namah* manuscript (Book of Kings), a copy of a Persian translation of the *Tarikh al-Rusul wa-al Muluk* (History of the Apostles and Kings) by Tabari (839–923), which was made by al-Balami in the 10th century, a copy of the *Athar al-Baqiyah* (The Abiding Memorials from the Generations that Have Passed Away) by the Islamic scholar al-Biruni (973–1048), and a copy of the *Jami'at Tawarikh* (Universal History) composed by Rashid ad-Din (d. 1318) (Arnold 1965: 16–19; Soucek: 194). To give an indication of the milieu in which these manuscripts were composed: Rashid ad-Din lived in the Persian city of Tabriz and was the prime minister

of two princes of a Mongol dynasty ruling parts of Persia at the time (Arnold 1965: 74–75).

In most of these pictures Muhammad is represented without a halo and there is no indication of his exalted status as the Apostle of Allah, except for the prominent position he occupies in each separate picture. In the copies of the Persian translation of the *Tarikh al-Rusul wa-al Muluk* and in the *Athar al-Baqiyah*, however, the Prophet almost always appears with the round halo so familiar in Christian art. Too much importance must not be attached to it, since Muhammad shares it with Ali, the other rightly-guided caliphs, other prophets and, in the *Athar al-Baqiyah*, even with people of bad reputation such as Ahriman, the spirit of evil, the false prophet Bihafrid and King Nebuchadnezzar when he burns Jerusalem. According to Sir Thomas W. Arnold the halo seems to be a meaningless decoration here. It is used only to indicate some sovereignty (Arnold 1965: 95–96; 119 and plates XVIII b; XIX a and b; XX a and b; LIII; Soucek: 195–198, 210–217; Website *Mohammed Image Archive*).

In the *Tarikh al-Rusul wa-al Muluk* Muhammad is recognizable by his dark moustache and beard and by his dark hair hanging over his shoulders. His cousin Ali had his hair occasionally arranged in a similar fashion. In Rashid ad-Din's work the Prophet is depicted with a tall, somewhat emaciated body and a melancholy expression on his countenance. He has a moustache and a beard. Moreover, the pictures show Chinese influences, especially in the drawing of trees and the character of the landscape. The costumes of the warriors are Mongolian and the sovereigns wear Mongolian clothes. There are many indications that the prevailing influence in these pictures came from the East, even though the painters must have had Christian as well as Hindu pictures to work from (Arnold 1965: 94 and plates XVIII b; XIX a and b; XX a and b; LIII; Soucek: 195, 210–217).

A manuscript that dates from 1485 still contains depictions of the Prophet as described above (Arnold 1965: 97 and plate XXII). But after the 16th century Muhammad is no longer recognizable by a halo but by a blazing aureole. The traits of his face are no longer visible, since it is covered from his forehead to his chin by a veil or curtain. The blazing aureole finds its origin in depictions and images of Buddha. Some other prophets, such as Ibrahim and Ali, are also represented (Arnold 1965: 98–99 and plate XXI a and b). In a manuscript dating from 1632 Muhammad is represented only by a flame and in an 18th-century

copy he is depicted riding on the horse Buraq, whereas he is completely covered by a *burka* (Arnold 1965: 99 and plate LVI).

It is clear that the Islamic scholars succeeded in increasingly restraining the new influence that originated with the Mongols, who had no problem in depicting the Prophet. Nonetheless, there were still pictures representing Muhammad as a human being with a halo circulating in Iran in the 19th century (Grabar: 33–34; VIII; Website *Mohammed Image Archive*). The picture was printed on a so-called *hilye*, originally a text describing the outward appearance of Muhammad. The most popular example was the *hilye* attributed to the Prophet's son-in-law and nephew Ali ibn Ali Talib (d. 661), who related that Muhammad was of medium build with wavy hair (not too curly), his flesh was firm, his skin was of rosy whiteness, he had large black eyes with long eyelashes, fine hair on his chest, and the 'seal of prophecy' between his shoulder blades. These descriptions became the basis for the stylized compositions of single pages called *hilye*s which were popular in the Ottoman period. In the 16th century calligraphers transformed the text into an ornamental calligraphic image. In Iran these *hilye*s were sometimes accompanied by portraits of Muhammad or Ali (Grabar: 34–35).

The merging of this visual tradition with the primarily verbal tradition found its ultimate 20th-century expression in the images of the Prophet currently available in Shi'ite Iran. It is a modern print of an adolescent male in a sensual pose. His head bends down toward his shoulder, his lips are parted in a smile, his eyes carry a languorous look. In Iran it is said that it is a copy of an image made by the Christian monk Bahirah who lived in southern Syria and, according to Muslim tradition, met Muhammad before he had been called a prophet. The original painting is supposed to be in a museum somewhere in the Christian world. It is a new tradition, since the tradition about the monk Bahira does not include any reference to a painting of Muhammad (Grabar: 35; IX).

It is clear that the attitude of the Muslims towards depicting the Prophet of Islam is much more complicated than might be expected from the pronounced prohibitions promulgated by the *ulama*. The history of Islam shows that up until the present there were various exceptions to these prohibitions, even in Iran, which is currently dominated by one of the strictest varieties of Islam. In spite of the repeated prohibitions depicting Muhammad, many Muslims obviously felt and still feel the need for portrayals of the Prophet, and, as became clear in this chapter, of a feature film. In these depictions the Prophet always

remained a human being, although the blazing aureoles in the pictures made between the 16th and 18th centuries clearly depict a man in close relationship to God. For that reason, in the 18th century he was represented only by a flame. In the same century, however, the *hilye*s appeared in which he was portrayed as a human again.

3. Conclusions

In spite of the many difficulties Moustapha Akkad encountered when making his film about the Prophet, he could look back on his efforts with a certain degree of satisfaction. It is generally established that, in the events he selected, The Message follows Muslim tradition quite accurately. Various experts declare that the shooting of his film, which follows what Bordwell classifies as classical narration, is technically impressive and the actors gave credible performances. Thus, the film contains beautiful desert vistas as well as impressive intimate scenes. It is certainly a better than the average film (*Variety Film Reviews*, 18 August 1976).

Of course, it was not easy to translate the texts of an age-old tradition into the cultural atmosphere of the 20th century. In fact, Akkad was confronted with problems analogous to those faced by the authors of modern biographies of Muhammad: they had to make a translation of a similar kind. In this process Akkad chose the same solutions. His portrayal of Muhammad stresses that the Apostle is a normal man, so he does not do many miracles. The only miracle that is depicted is the revelation of God at the moment the voice of the angel Gabriel is heard speaking to Muhammad. After his first revelation, the Apostle starts to struggle against idolatry and the social abuses in his city. The Prophet hates to use violence; he is merciful and ready to forgive—the only people killed by Muslims are their enemies on the battlefield. The Apostle's opponents, on the other hand, are eager to use violence, but Muhammad is a man of peace, full of compassion towards the weak.

The motion picture emphasizes that the Prophet stands in the same tradition as the Jews and the Christians: it is their God who calls Muhammad to become His messenger. The attitude of the Jews towards the claim of the Messenger is passed over in silence, but the two Christians declare that the similarity between Christianity and Islam is very great. In the words of the king of Abyssinia they are 'two

rays of the same lamp'. The Byzantine emperor does not exclude the possibility that the revelations Muhammad received do indeed have their origins in God.

Here we may conclude that the Prophet in the portrait given by the Muslim tradition and Muhammad Husayn Haykal's book is less peaceful than the portrait in the film. The film's omission of the deteriorating relationship with the Jews and the violent solutions the Apostle chose is revealing. Without asserting that Muhammad was fond of violence, the conclusion cannot be avoided that THE MESSAGE presents a more peaceful image of the Prophet than Muslim tradition does. In this respect Akkad is following in the footsteps of the authors of the modern biographies of Muhammad.

The positive attitude towards the Christians is reflected in both Muslim tradition and Haykal's biography. Nevertheless, it should be said that the objective of the claim of the Muslim tradition that the difference between Islam and Christianity is close to nil is more to legitimize the authority of the Prophet and Islam than to enter into good relations with Christians. In Muslim tradition Christians are also asked to acknowledge the authority of Muhammad and are told that if they refuse to do so, the Muslims will turn against them. THE MESSAGE, however, keeps things more open.

The restrictions of the Muslim scholars of al-Azhar and the Lebanese Shi'ite Council have had far-reaching consequences. While Muhammad has a central position in Muslim tradition, in the film he has to leave many things to others whom the first decision of the *ulama* allowed to be depicted, among them Zayd, Hamza and Bilal. Even though the Prophet also has a central role in the film, these figures come to the fore. Another result has to do with the position of the audience. As a consequence of the camera angles, the audience is at times placed in the position of the Apostle. This caused opposition to the film to increase among Muslims. The third result is that Muhammad was represented as a man without any women in his immediate circle. He thus became comparable to a celibate, which in Muslim tradition was absolutely not the case. As a consequence, however, the portrayal of Muhammad in THE MESSAGE complies better with the expectations of Christians, Hindus and Buddhists.

Muslim legal scholars have recently permitted the use of the techniques followed in THE MESSAGE for an animated film about Muhammad but prohibited the use of these techniques in THE MESSAGE itself

and indeed increased the restrictions. In spite of the opposition of the last 30 years, authoritative Muslim scholars seemed, on the one hand, to see the importance of spreading the message of Islam and its Prophet through modern mass media, so that they were apparently prepared to repeat their tiny concessions with regard to an animated film. This is a step forward, however small, in accepting the use of modern mass media for religious matters as well. On the other hand, the portrayal of the Prophet is still bound by restrictions that considerably distort the historical facts about the Apostle. So the depiction of Muhammad will always be untruthful to some extent, however hard the filmmakers attempt to do justice to historical reality. The recent decision to prohibit representations of the *sahaba* as well makes it practically impossible to produce a feature film about the Prophet.

The history of Islam demonstrates, however, that the authority of the *ulama* has never been absolute. Islamic tradition itself speaks of portraits of the Prophet preserved by prominent Christians. Furthermore, depictions of Muhammad are found in manuscripts dating from the middle of the 13th century, which were done by Muslims. They depict the Apostle as a normal human being. But after the 16th century, his special status as a man of God is shown by means of a blazing aureole, whereas in the 18th century he is represented only by a flame. Surprisingly, the depiction of the Apostle as a normal man returns in the 19th-century *hilye*s and a development in the 20th century resulted in a portrait of a friendly young man circulating in Iran. So it may be concluded that the attitude of the Muslims towards depicting the Prophet of Islam is much more complicated than what might be expected from the vehement prohibitions promulgated by the *ulama*.

Christian authorities have also tried to place restrictions on the portrayal of their Lord, Jesus Christ, but when they discovered the advantages of the new medium they changed their attitude. The tiny step forward made by the Muslim authorities shows that the Muslim world has not yet reached a complete standstill in this regard. Within three years, however, this step was followed by a more restrictive decision concerning films about Muhammad. So it remains unclear as to the direction in which developments within the world of Islam will go. The pictures of the Prophet circulating especially in one of the countries with the strictest form of Islam show that there is pressure on the authorities to be more lenient. Islam is not as strictly opposed to depicting Muhammad as it claims. Nevertheless, it may be so that

we will not see a feature film in which the Prophet is represented by an actor for another 30 years. So THE MESSAGE will be unique and alone for another long period of modern history, still contributing in the meantime to the propagation of Islam in spite of the vetoes by the highest Muslim religious authorities.

CHAPTER SIX

JESUS RESTYLED

In 1976 an Indian Jesus film was released, Jesus (Isa Maseeh), directed by P.A. Thomas. It was—as far as I can discover—the first Jesus film ever made in India. Since it was made in Chennai (Madras), a Tamil-speaking city,[1] the movie was probably in Tamil, but a Hindi-dubbed version of it does exist. The editor followed a completely new approach, since the film lasted 132 minutes and contained five songs (Dharap: P44). Thus, it seemed to follow the formula of the classical Indian movie, which Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy define as 'a star, six songs and three dances' (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy: 155). But it is impossible to go into more detail, since the film itself seems to be lost.

Fortunately, it was not the last film that followed this formula, since in 1978 the Roman Catholic merchant Vijaya Chander produced another one called Karuna Mayudu (Man of Compassion). Chander lived in Hyderabad, the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh, where the majority of the population speaks Telugu. So it will come as no surprise that this picture is a Telugu movie. It was not until 2004 that the next Jesus film of this type was released, Shanti Sandesham (Message of Peace) directed by P. Chandrasekhar Reddy, also a Telugu movie. In 2006 a Jesus film called Color of the Cross was produced featuring a black Jesus. Its director was Jean-Claude LaMarre. But earlier, in that very same year, another film with a black Jesus was released but this time in South Africa by the British director Mark Dornford-May (b. 1955). It was called Jezile or, in English, Son of Man. A completely new type of Jesus film is thus coming into existence in which Jesus is portrayed in the context of a culture that is not directly related to his white Jewish background.

The story of the gospels is not the only narrative, however, that is set in a context foreign to its original background. In 1989 the British filmmaker Peter Brook (b. 1925) produced an English film entitled The Mahabharata, in which the ancient Indian epic was played by an

[1] The official name of Madras is now Chennai, which I will use in the present study.

international cast drawn from each of the five continents, in order to emphasize the universal nature of the story and to ensure international appeal (Gillespie: 364–365). As a man of the theatre, Brook was well known for his Shakespeare productions (Website *IMDb*). Marie Gillespie revealed that Brook's approach was not appreciated by a London Hindu family of Indian descent (Gillespie). Another example of a film placing an epic in a context different from its original background is OPERA JAWA produced by the Indonesian Javanese director Garin Nugroho in 2006. The film shows a Javanese version of the Ramayana epic in the context of daily life in a Javanese town. This feature can also be regarded as a borderline case, however, since Javanese culture is so deeply influenced by Indian culture and religion that Java can be considered to be part of the area that is dominated to a certain degree by Indian civilization. Therefore, OPERA JAWA is not really set in a foreign cultural environment. The Ramayana epic is still part and parcel of Javanese culture. So this picture can also be seen as a Rama variety of a Jesus film that takes place in New York, such as GODSPELL.

In section 2 of Chapter Two it was already pointed out that the Western Jesus films can be regarded as a reflection of the various images of Jesus prevalent in the West when these movies were produced.[2] Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate the images of Jesus in these other films produced in a context other than that of Western Christianity, which was so often considered the original and authentic backdrop of the Jesus films. This chapter will first review and analyze the two Indian Jesus films, then JEZILE and finally COLOR OF THE CROSS. The next section will explore the question if these movies present something unique, something not found in the other Jesus pictures. The conclusion will discuss what these films contribute to the portrayal of Jesus or, to put it in the terms of the present study, to the depiction of transcendence.

1. THE INDIAN JESUS FILMS

The Indian Jesus films raise some problems, since they are in Telugu, a language with which the present author is unfamiliar. Only the second Indian film, SHANTI SANDESHAM, has English subtitles, although the

[2] See Chapter Two, pp. 50–51.

English is very poor. Fortunately, a Telugu-speaking person was willing to assist me when we were both watching KARUNA MAYUDU.[3] In spite of their mutual differences, which I will look at later, there is a great similarity between the two films. I therefore prefer to present the content of KARUNA MAYUDU only and will indicate the differences between the two pictures afterwards.[4] But before entering into the details of these two films, we must look at the history of the Jesus film in India.

1.1. *The History of the Indian Jesus Films*

It was already stated in Chapter Three that the screening of Jesus films in India had tremendous consequences, since these films inspired the making of mythologicals. What would have happened if Dadasaheb Phalke had not seen a Jesus film in 1910? It was very common to screen Jesus films on the subcontinent, because DeMille's THE KING OF KINGS was shown to many people in the 1930s. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries were fond of using American and European films, even up to the present. Nonetheless, the need for a Jesus film made in India arose.

The first to express this need was the famous Tamil film star M.G. Ramachandran (1917–1987) or MGR, as he was usually called. A meeting was held in Chennai on 25 December 1969, Christmas Day, attended by M. Karunanidhi (b. 1924), chief minister of Tamilnadu at the time, and the Roman Catholic archbishop of Madras-Mylapore. At this meeting MGR announced the production of a film called THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST in which he himself would play Jesus (Das Gupta: 211–212). At that time MGR was still collaborating with Karunanidhi. According to Chidananda Das Gupta, they saw a good instrument here for gaining Christian voters for their Tamil DMK party. Almost a decade later, after his break with Karunanidhi, MGR followed a similar method in getting Hindu votes for his own AIADMK party (Das Gupta: 199–247).[5]

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[3] I am grateful to Muppala Xavier, a native Telugu speaker who helped me understand the spoken texts of the film on 21 February 2006. He is a Roman Catholic priest from Andhra Pradesh.

[4] A survey of the contents of SHANTI SANDESHAM is included in my article entitled 'SHANTI SANDESHAM, A New Jesus Film Produced in India: Indian Christology in Pictures' (Bakker 2007b).

[5] Das Gupta carefully points out that MGR always chose to play roles that showed him bringing succour to the needy in many walks of life. Unlike his fellow politician N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), who was the prime minister of Andhra Pradesh from 1983–1989 and 1994–1996, MGR avoided playing gods or mythological characters.

The archbishop obviously did not appreciate the idea of having MGR produce a Jesus film, since he turned the project down shortly after the meeting on Christmas 1969.[6] Even so, the incident demonstrates the importance of Jesus films, at least in the eyes of politicians.

Seven years later the first Indian Jesus film became a reality even in Chennai: JESUS (ISA MASEEH) directed by P.A. Thomas. Unfortunately, it was impossible to get a copy.

1.2. *The Content of the Indian Jesus Films*

Karuna Mayudu

Two years later, in 1978, the second Indian Jesus film was produced—a Telugu movie made in Hyderabad. It is called KARUNA MAYUDU and Vijaya Chander both directed it and played Jesus. The other actors appear also to have been amateurs. All this makes the movie very similar to Pier Paolo Pasolini's IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO. The film lasts 160 minutes and includes three songs—so it also follows the formula of the classical Indian movie, although the number of songs is somewhat small. The film is dubbed in the official languages of India except for English and Sanskrit. The Hindi version, which is called DAYA SAGAR (Embodiment of Mercy), has become very popular. The American mission organization Dayspring International arranges the distribution of the DVDS (Website *Dayspring International*). Dayspring International discovered that this film presenting an Indian Jesus succeeded better at touching the hearts of the Indians than an American Jesus film, for the audience regarded the Jesus of a Western film as a foreigner. For the same reason Dayspring International does not distribute an English version of KARUNA MAYUDU. A film in the local language is more likely to touch the hearts of the people. Dayspring International's main motive of for distributing these films is that they will be used in evangelism campaigns. The objective of such a campaign is to reach the hearts of the people.[7]

The camerawork is not very special, since it almost always follows the narration of the picture. There is an occasional close-up of someone.

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[6] Personal communication by various professors of the Vidyajyoti University in Delhi, including Professor George Mlakuzhyil SJ, 21 and 22 February 2006.

[7] Interview with Jay Paul, a staff member of Dayspring International in the office in Green Valley near Secunderabad, 6 January 2009. For more information about the use of the Tamil version of KARUNA MAYUDU in evangelism campaigns see: Jeyaraj: 225–234.

But sometimes beautiful panoramas are screened, such as during the Sermon of the Mount, so that the huge crowd following Jesus becomes visible. But slightly later it also shows the people fleeing when a leper approaches him. Jesus wears a long white robe and a red or a white stole over his shoulders. Sometimes he dons a robe with red stripes.[8]

> The movie starts with the narration of the announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary. It relates Joseph's discovery of Mary's pregnancy, the soothing words of an angel in his dream, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the song of the angels, the visits of the shepherds and the magi, the escape to Egypt, Herod's anger, the killing of the children of Bethlehem, a scene in which Mary reads scriptures for her young son, the return to Nazareth, the dialogue of the young Jesus with the teachers in the temple in Jerusalem and a scene in which Jesus helps his father in his carpentry. This whole part is sung, thus giving it the nature of an introduction to the real story of KARUNA MAYUDU.
>
> The real story starts with three scenes delineating the oppression of common people in Judea because of the hypocrisy of the high priests (including Caiaphas and Annas), the violent raids by the Zealots under Barabbas and the high taxes demanded by the tax collectors. Interestingly, Judas Iscariot turns out to be one of Barabbas' followers. When the fishermen revolt against the high taxes, the Roman soldiers harass them. The Zealots intervene and attack the Roman soldiers. They enjoy fighting against the Romans but disappear immediately afterwards without helping the victims. Thus, their fights do not help the people but only increase their suffering.
>
> A blind man meets John, one of Jesus' disciples, and asks him: 'When will the Messiah come to wipe the tears from our eyes?' 'The Messiah is coming', John answers, but the blind man can no longer believe this. He begins to sing a song entitled *Devulu* (God) in which he exclaims: 'It seems that God doesn't exist. What else can I say than that God doesn't exist?' In the meantime, images pass by in which a crowd stones an adulterous woman, a rich man casts a piece of bread in the air over which hungry people fight and end up killing a young boy. The rich man laughs loudly.
>
> The film continues with the appearance of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism and his temptation in the desert. An owl, which in Telugu culture is an ill omen, flies into the scene. Jesus is very hungry. A snake appears and laughter is heard. The snake asks him why he does not command the stones to become bread. Jesus answers in the way related in Matthew and Luke. Subsequently, a man in black clothes and horns on his head

[8] In the sequences representing Jesus' meeting with the adulterous woman and his raising of Lazarus.

asks Jesus why he does not jump from the roof of the temple. When Jesus refuses, the same man offers Jesus all kingdoms of the earth if he worships him. But Jesus refuses again, and the man disappears. Thunder is heard immediately and there is a shower, which in Telugu culture is a sign of victory.

At the seashore Jesus calls the first disciples and later Matthew as well. He heals a dumb man on the Sabbath, which causes a debate as to whether it is permitted to heal the sick on the Sabbath. While Barabbas and Judas Iscariot are looking on, Jesus begins his Sermon of the Mount with the Beatitudes, but a leper stands up and approaches him. All those present flee, but Jesus heals him. Then Barabbas approaches him and asks him if he is willing to collaborate with him, but Jesus refuses, saying: 'My kingdom is a kingdom of love. We must love our friends as well as our enemies. I'd rather die for you than collaborate with you.' Barabbas leaves Jesus, but Judas decides to abandon Barabbas and to follow Jesus who accepts him in spite of the criticism of the other disciples. The disciples then cross the sea in their boat, but it begins to storm and the disciples are very afraid. Suddenly they see Jesus walking on the water and they become even more afraid. But Jesus calms them down. Now Peter wants to walk on the water too. He climbs out of the boat and begins to walk, but when he starts to sink he becomes afraid. He calls out to Jesus and Jesus saves him.

In the next sequence Jesus saves an adulterous woman from people who are threatening to stone her. Mary Magdalene sees this from the balcony of her house and afterwards goes to Jesus and washes his feet with her hair. Jesus forgives her as well, recounting the parable in Matthew 18 about the two slaves. He subsequently heals the blind man we met earlier singing about his inability to believe in God. After meeting with Mary, his mother, Jesus lays his hands on children and blesses them.

In the next scene Jesus gives bread and fish to a large crowd of 5000 people. Judas wants to crown him after this, but Jesus rebukes him. Then Jesus is told that Lazarus has passed away and he goes to his grave and raises him from the dead. Next, Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly, seated on a donkey followed by a small foal. The people sing the second song of the film: 'Hallelujah!'

Jesus then cleanses the temple. Judas again tries to have him crowned, but Jesus again refuses. As a result, Judas consults Barabbas and his friends who pressure him to have Jesus arrested. Judas goes to the high priests. Caiaphas and Annas tell him that they could have the Romans arrest him, Judas, because of his association with Barabbas, but that they will let him go if he hands Jesus over to them.

In the meantime some disciples are busy preparing the Passover celebration. When all the disciples, including Judas, are present Jesus washes their feet. When he comes to Judas, he sends him away to do what he

is going to do, and Judas leaves. Jesus then institutes the Lord's Supper. After the meal he walks with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. He announces that Peter will deny him, but Peter protests fiercely. After their arrival in the Gethsemane, he chooses Peter, James and John to accompany him on a walk deeper into the garden. Jesus prays two times, but to his disappointment he discovers that the three disciples have fallen asleep. Then the Roman soldiers arrive, having been led there by Judas, who kisses Jesus. Jesus is arrested and all the other disciples flee. In the meantime, Barabbas is arrested as well and rejoices when he hears that Jesus has been arrested. Peter wanders about near the place to which Jesus is brought. He is asked three times if he is also part of the group surrounding Jesus and three times he denies it. Then a rooster crows and Jesus passes by and looks at him. Peter begins to weep and asks God to forgive him.

Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin, but the council discusses only how Pilate is to be approached so that he will condemn Jesus to death. Thus, no trial takes place here and they then bring Jesus to Pilate. After they have explained that Jesus claims to be the Son of God, which is blasphemy, Pilate asks Caiaphas why they do not excommunicate him. The high priest replies that Jesus' claim has political implications as well as religious ones. Jesus incited the people against the Roman Empire, he says, by proclaiming that they do not need to pay taxes to the emperor. When Pilate asks Jesus if he confirms these accusations, Jesus answers that his kingdom is not of this world. Pilate subsequently asks Jesus if he really is the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus responds that he will see the glory of God after this. At that moment Caiaphas incites the people to shout 'Crucify him' and the people obey. Pilate asks Jesus if these accusations are false, but Jesus remains silent, after which Pilate decides to have him flogged. After Jesus is brought back to him, Pilate proposes that the people choose who is to be set free, Jesus or Barabbas, since Pilate finds no basis for charging Jesus. They choose Barabbas. Pilate then washes his hands and decrees the death sentence for Jesus. When Barrabbas hears in jail that he is to be released whereas Jesus will be crucified, he remembers Jesus' words 'I'd rather die for you than collaborate with you.' He is filled with great remorse and leaves the jail crying 'Prabhu, Prabhu' (Lord, Lord) and praying for forgiveness. A song called *Kadilindi Karunaradadam* (The Chariot of Mercy) is sung about how Jesus, in bearing the cross, bears the sins of humankind.

While Jesus is making his way to Golgotha, Barabbas is shown still shouting 'Prabhu, Prabhu'. Huge crowds come to look at Jesus on his way to Golgotha. Full of sorrow, Mary lays her head on Mary Magdalene's breast. The cross becomes too heavy for Jesus. The Romans compel a passerby to take over carrying the cross, but later Jesus himself is carrying the cross again. His feet leave behind footprints of blood. Suddenly he stoops, takes a thorn from between his toes and continues on his way.

When he arrives at Golgotha, Jesus is crucified. The hammering of the nails through his hands and feet is elaborately shown on-screen. Then the audience sees Jesus' suffering, including all the events and all the things he said on the cross as narrated in the gospels. But two things are added. First, a text in Hebrew is added to the three varieties of the inscription on the notice fastened to the cross. Second, Barabbas is shown still crying 'Prabhu, Prabhu'.

After Jesus' death, there is a violent storm followed immediately by an earthquake and a solar eclipse. When the sun returns to view, a Roman officer declares: 'Surely, he was the Son of God.' Judas' dead body is shown hanging from a tree. The soldiers establish that Jesus is really dead and take his body down from the cross, laying it on Mary's stomach. She cries. Then the women who once accompanied Jesus clean and embalm his body and the men carry it to the grave, go inside, lay it down and leave. Some high priests come to the tomb accompanied by soldiers whom they instruct to guard it. Jesus' disciples gather in a house and mourn.

Suddenly, lightning flashes near the grave and the soldiers flee. The stone rolls away and Jesus walks out of the grave and then disappears. The chorus 'Hallelujah, hallelujah' is sung.

Jesus disciples are still mourning inside the house, but Jesus suddenly appears near the door. One of the disciples sees him and goes to him. Jesus shows the marks left by the nails in his hands and feet to Thomas, who cries 'Prabhu, Prabhu'. Jesus later takes Peter aside and speaks to him about his denial of him. Peter expresses his remorse, saying 'Prabhu, Prabhu" while asking for forgiveness.

The next sequence of the film shows Jesus lifting his right hand in the same way as the gods and Buddha do when they wish to say that fear is unnecessary.[9] In the meantime, Jesus gradually grows larger, while the 'Hallelujah' song is heard. Then he disappears behind a cloud of glittering stars descending from heaven.

Shanti Sandesham

In 2004 a new Indian Jesus film was released, SHANTI SANDESHAM. The film was produced by Sakamuri Mallikarjuna Rao and directed by P. Chandrasekhar Reddy. Its credits express gratitude to Rev. Scott Norling, Rev. P.N.S. Chandra Bose and A. Mallakarjuna. Then the credits state that the film is presented by the Gospel Mission of India, a mission organization of Protestant Evangelical background, which has its headquarters in Warren, Michigan, in the USA. Its many activities include

[9] The *abhaya mudra*.

building and organizing homes for orphans and abandoned children. Both Chandra Bose and Norling were attached to the Gospel Mission of India and wanted to use the film in their missionary work, but Scott Norling has dissociated himself from the film, since he disagreed with the final result.[10] This remaining part of the present section will show that Norling's distancing himself from the film is not surprising.

Although the film is known in Indian Christian circles, it was not screened in any Indian cinema.[11] Nonetheless, it is possible to buy the film via the Internet, by ordering it on the website of Volga Videos in Hyderabad.

The outdoor shots of the film were done partly on a site that contained many ruins and partly on a film set, whereas the indoor shots were done in a studio. The ruins are the remnants of what appears to have been a princely palace in the 17th or 18th century.

Professional actors were asked to play the main roles. Jesus is played by Krishna, an actor in his early 60s who had played prominent roles in other movies.[12] The majority of the cast, however, seems to consist of amateurs. The actors are dressed colourfully,[13] but Jesus is always dressed in a white robe and a stole in white, dark red or blue. In certain important scenes such as those during his last Passover meal, he wears a white stole. He is a tall man, has half-length hair and a beard. Mary, Jesus' mother, always wears a green headscarf.

The directors and most of the performers belong to the landowning *shudra* community,[14] a ruling caste in Andhra. They conformed to the

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[10] E-mail sent by his brother-in-law, Joel Forsberg, 5 December 2005; letter from James Tanetti, 10 May 2007. There is no indication that Rev P.N.S. Chandra Bose, who is referred to as the president of the Gospel Mission of India on 11 January 2005 (Website of the *Bible Society of Singapore*), dissociated himself from the film as well. The website of the Gospel Mission of India does not mention him, but it does not mention anyone (Website of the *Gospel Mission of India*).

[11] Letter from James Tanetti, 10 May 2007.

[12] Krishna was also a prominent actor in EVARU NENU, a Telugu film produced by Bhimeswara Rao Munjuluri in 2005 (*The Hindu*, 1 July 2003, website of *The Hindu*; Website of *Telugucinema.com*; Website of *Great Andhra.com*).

[13] Murali, who was responsible for the costumes, won a Nandi Award for Best Cortume Designer in Telugu films for SHANTI SANDESHAM in 2004. A Nandi Award is a cinema award granted by the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh (Website *Galatta.com*).

[14] *Shudras* are members of the fourth *varna* or class of the caste system, just below the *vaishya* or merchant class and just above the large group of *dalit*s. The word *shudra* is often translated as 'labourer', meaning that they had to serve the higher castes, including the Brahmans with their labour. The *dalit*s were previously often called

acting style and image of Krishna, the actor playing Jesus, because they knew that he would be the hero in the movie, since he owns Padmalaya Studio, which produced the movie. Krishna himself proposed the idea as a means to make a comeback as a film star after a decade-long thin patch in his career.[15]

The camerawork is not very special either in this film which contains six songs. Furthermore, the picture omits only two important scenes included in KARUNA MAYUDU, the scene displaying the great oppression the people have to endure and the healing of the leper when Jesus gives the Sermon of the Mount. Much more important is what the movie adds and alters. Unlike KARUNA MAYUDU, which is based more or less on the synoptic gospels, SHANTI SANDESHAM attempts to follow the gospel of John. As a consequence, it includes a number of narratives related only in John but not included in KARUNA MAYUDU, such as the wedding at Cana, the meeting with the Samaritan woman near a well, the healing of an invalid at the pool of Bethesda and Jesus' appearing to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection. It also includes material derived from the other gospels, such as the dance of Salome, King Herod II's stepdaughter, the beheading of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29), some other healings and the warning of Pilate's wife (Matthew 27:19).

Furthermore, SHANTI SANDESHAM contains two other stories that are not found in the New Testament. When the tension between Jesus and the Sanhedrin rises, the Sanhedrin decides that everyone who was baptized by John the Baptist has to pay extra taxes. Shortly afterwards, a cohort of Roman soldiers goes to the temple to collect these new taxes from the people there. They start to beat the people, but then a group of Jewish rebels led by Barabbas and his friend Judas Iscariot enters the city and attacks the soldiers, some of whom are seriously wounded. When the commander is killed, the soldiers flee. When Barabbas raises his sword to kill another wounded soldier lying on the ground in front of him, Jesus appears with his disciples. 'Barabbas!' Jesus shouts. He lowers his sword and Jesus and Barabbas look each other in the eye. Then Jesus goes to the wounded and heals them. Finally, he raises the commander from the dead. The commander thanks Jesus and Jesus

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pariahs or untouchables, but *dalit* is preferred at the present time because that is the designation they themselves use.

[15] Letter from James Tanetti, 10 May 2007.

asks why he beat the people. He answers that the reason is that they refused to pay taxes. The people tell Jesus that they already have to pay very high taxes. Jesus then asks the commander why he levied more taxes. 'Because they chose to be baptized by John the Baptist,' he answers. 'Tell the chief priests that we will not pay these taxes,' Jesus says. Then the commander leaves followed by his soldiers. Jesus tries to convince Barabbas to stop trying to found a new Jewish kingdom through violence. Barabbas says that that would be impossible and leaves, but his friend Judas Iscariot remains with Jesus, since he believes that Jesus' way of liberation of the Jews is better. Jesus appoints him his twelfth apostle.

The second story not narrated in the gospels is Barabbas' attempted murder of King Herod II in his bedroom. Barabbas is caught, however, and imprisoned.

Other changes concern the way some narratives are presented. John the Baptist, for example, announces that astrology says that auspicious days have come. This is remarkable, since there are no references to astrology in the gospels. There John refers to the prophets instead. In the temptation in the desert Satan is presented as a person who clearly recalls, through his actions and laughter, the *rakshasa*s (demons) of the mythologicals. The Jewish religious authorities, including Caiaphas, Annas, and Nicodemus, are also present at Herod's party, and Caiaphas and Annas utter their approval of the beheading of John the Baptist. Very moving is Jesus' visit to a leper colony, which ends in his embracing the lepers. The meeting with the Samaritan woman is placed in the context of the caste system. The Jews are depicted as a caste group who do not wish to mingle with untouchables, the people of the village where the Samaritan woman lives. Jesus breaks down the barriers between them, but his disciples clearly disagree with their master. The blessing of the children is placed within the same pattern. Jesus' disciples send them away, and when Jesus asks them why they do so, they answer that the children belong to the Pharisees. 'You are wrong,' Jesus says, 'It does not matter from whom they come, they are all children of God, so they are all welcome.' Jesus is thus portrayed as a man who crosses the boundaries between the various groups in his own environment while advocating the rights of the people discriminated against and excluded by the others. Furthermore, the religious authorities are presented as close allies of cruel political leaders like King Herod II.

1.3. *The Background of the Indian Jesus Films*

The Biblical Background

Both films are clearly based on the gospels. KARUNA MAYUDU consists of 101 scenes, 43 of which are derived from Matthew, 23 from Mark, 30 from Luke and 33 from John. Ten of them are found in all the gospels. Most scenes come from Matthew, whereas the film generally follows the order of the synoptic gospels. SHANTI SANDESHAM has 102 scenes, 42 of which are derived from Matthew, 28 from Mark, 36 from Luke and 39 from John. Twelve are scenes found in all the gospels. It is clear that most scenes come from Matthew, but the movie follows the order of the gospel of John.

Although KARUNA MAYUDU follows the synoptic gospels more and SHANTI SANDESHAM is more Johannine, so much material from all the gospels has been used that the conclusion is justified that both pictures offer a reasonably representative image of the content of all the gospels. Nonetheless, many Indian Christians consider KARUNA MAYUDU to be more in agreement with the Bible than SHANTI SANDESHAM (Bakker 2007b: 62). KARUNA MAYUDU includes 32 scenes that are not found in the gospels, SHANTI SANDESHAM only 21. Therefore, this cannot be why the Indian Christians prefer the former; there must be other reasons.

One reason is probably that SHANTI SANDESHAM takes greater liberty with depicting the biblical scenes than KARUNA MAYUDA does, sometimes so much liberty that the question arises if the filmmaker really knew the details of the gospel narratives. A good example is the role of Andrew, who is very often shot in close-up. In Gethsemane he even takes over the role of James. Jesus asks Peter, John and Andrew to go with him into the garden. This prominence of Andrew is not found in the gospels.[16]

There are also various new scenes common to both KARUNA MAYUDU and SHANTI SANDESHAM that are not found in other Jesus films. They are: the friendship between Judas Iscariot and Barabbas before they meet Jesus and Judas' decision to become Jesus' disciple whereas Barabbas decides to remain a Zealot, the scene in which Mary Magdalene, being a rich woman, sees from her balcony how Jesus deals with the adulterous woman, Jesus extracting a thorn from between his toes, his taking

[16] Another inaccuracy that suggests that the filmmaker was not really accquainted with the content of the gospels is that King Herod II is called Archelaos in the subtitles.

over the cross from Simon of Cyrene again, the bloody footprints Jesus leaves on his way to Golgotha, Mary Magdalene's fruitless attempt to go to the cross after Jesus has been crucified, and the opening of the grave and Jesus' walking out of the grave. These similarities make clear that, in spite of the differences, certain elements of KARUNA MAYUDU were copied in SHANTI SANDESHAM. The conclusion is perhaps justified that a separate Telugu tradition of Jesus films is emerging.

SHANTI SANDESHAM also contains two other new narratives, however, that relate how Jesus raises a Roman officer from the dead and how Barabbas attempts to murder King Herod. These new additions are probably another reason why the Indian Christians prefer KARUNA MAYUDU to SHANTI SANDESHAM. Furthermore, the more explicit political context could have evoked alienation.

In both films, the most important title the people surrounding Jesus use to address him is *prabhu*. In an earlier publication the present author pointed out that *prabhu* is a well-chosen equivalent for the Greek word *kurios*, which is often used in the original text of the New Testament as a form of address and title for Jesus. Both words are used as a way of addressing both a powerful king as well as God (Bakker 2007b: 58). Two other titles used to address Jesus are *daivo kumar* and *rakshakuda*, i.e 'Son of God' and 'Saviour' respectively. Both of them are, just like *prabhu*, common designations for Jesus in the Telugu Bible translations and Telugu-speaking churches.[17]

James Tanetti, a Telugu-speaking Christian who was involved in the production of SHANTI SANDESHAM at its inception, mentions another basis for the alienation of Christians from SHANTI SANDESHAM. He declares that the language of the movie was not as close to the gospels as KARUNA MAYUDU, since it reflects the language of socialist writers of the 1970s. And Krishna, the actor playing Jesus, used similar language.[18] Moreover, his acting was artificial to a large degree, so he did not touch the hearts of the spectators, whereas Vijaya Chander gave a more convincing presentation of Jesus (Bakker 2007b: 62). Thus, it is the intention of the makers of KARUNA MAYUDU to be faithful to the language and the cultural world of the gospels that gave this picture its more Biblical flavour.

[17] Letter from James Tanetti, 10 May 2007.
[18] Letter from James Tanetti, 10 May 2007.

1.4. *The Indian Character of the Indian Jesus Films*

Both KARUNA MAYUDU and SHANTI SANDESHAM are obviously Indian films. The main reasons are, of course, that the Indian actors figure in pictures clearly based on the formula of the classical Indian movie. Moreover, they do so in an Indian environment using an Indian language.

Nonetheless, there are also some other features that give these movies an Indian flavour. The first is that all people who respect and love Jesus address him by the title *Prabhu*. It is this same word that is used for Rama in the Rama films, including Sagar's television serial. In this way the Indian spectators know on which level they are to place Jesus. The second feature is the trail of bloody footprints that Jesus leaves when he is carrying the cross to Golgotha. It underscores the radicalness of Jesus' love while simultaneously reflecting the importance of the footprints of important religious personalities in the Indian religion. At the same time, it gives the pictures a melodramatic flavour, but it is precisely this that makes the movies really Indian, since the great majority of Indian films, in particular the religious ones, are melodramatic (Dwyer 2006a: 58).

In KARUNA MAYUDU the owl in flight just before the temptation, the loud laughter that recalls the laughter of the demons in the Indian mythologicals and the shower after the temptation are all reminiscent of Telugu culture. At the end of KARUNA MAYUDU Jesus makes a gesture that will immediately be recognized in India, since it is a gesture made by both the gods and by Buddha when they wish to make clear to their adherents that they do not need to be afraid.

SHANTI SANDESHAM contains more features derived from Indian culture. It has more songs, but that is not the only thing. John the Baptist's reference to astrology is also typically Indian, since almost every practising Hindu who intends to undertake an important enterprise consults astrologers in advance, a habit also reflected in the mythologicals. During the temptation scene, the devil—a person in this movie—is also laughing loudly. Furthermore, SHANTI SANDESHAM gives some narratives an obvious Indian context. The best example is Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman near the well, where the Jews, and in particular their leaders, are presented as caste leaders discriminating against people of lower castes. All this makes SHANTI SANDESHAM a picture more in line with Indian culture than KARUNA MAYUDU. The best illustration of this is the scene of the adulterous woman. After Jesus sent her away and left, Mary Magdalene, who had

seen everything from the balcony of her house, goes to Jesus and washes his feet with her tears while he is attending a dinner. This agrees with a certain episode in the gospels, though there it remains unclear who the woman washing Jesus' feet really is. Such is the version of KARUNA MAYUDU, but in SHANTI SANDESHAM the story is different. In the latter Mary Magdalene goes down to the footprints Jesus left on the ground. She kneels down and there prays for forgiveness but realizes that this will not be enough. Later, she also washes Jesus' feet with her tears. Praying at someone's footprints is typically Indian.

1.5. *Preliminary Conclusions*

Both films are Indian, but KARUNA MAYUDU remains more faithful to the gospels, whereas SHANTI SANDESHAM contains more elements of Indian culture. In addition, SHANTI SANDESHAM is affected by the culture of the Indian communist parties. Not only its language but also the music and the melodies of the songs are derived from communist music and songs (Bakker 2007b: 62). Although KARUNA MAYUDU also presents Jesus as someone who sides with the poor and oppressed, SHANTI SANDESHAM is more radical in its portrayal of Jesus, since it refers more than once to the discrimination and exclusion of people of lower castes and *dalit*s by members of higher castes.[19]

2. THE SOUTH AFRICAN JESUS FILM

2.1. *Introduction*

On 22 January 2006 the first Jesus film with a black actor, Andile Kosi, playing the role of Jesus premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in the United States of America. The film, which lasts 86 minutes, is in Xhosa. Its title is JEZILE or, in English, SON OF MAN. In that same year it was screened at various other film festivals in the Netherlands and the

[19] In an earlier article (Bakker 2007b) the present author wrote that SHANTI SANDESHAM portrays Jesus as siding with the *dalit*s. James Tanetti, however, pointed out that the language of the film did not reflect *dalit* language. He even suggests that SHANTI SANDESHAM would have been in the cinemas if it really had been a *dalit* film, since the majority of the church people are from *dalit* background (Letter from James Tanetti, 10 May 2007). Nonetheless, the film has a strong bias against high caste people, which corresponds to the *shudra* background of the people who initiated its production.

United Kingdom. The director is Mark Dornford-May, a British theatre director who moved to South Africa in 2000. In 2005 Dornford-May had been successful with U-Carmen eKhayelitsha, another picture in Xhosa, in which he moved Bizet's *Carmen* to the modern Khayelitsha township in Cape Town, South Africa. The film won the Golden Bear at the 2005 Berlin Film Festival (Websites of *Film Network* and the German *Wikipedia*).

In fact, Dornford-May follows the same procedure in his Jesus film. The picture is shot in a South African environment, including a township, and the Jesus narrative was moved to the context of contemporary South Africa. Although Jezile was screened at various film festivals and was even broadcast on television in the Netherlands, the picture is still relatively unknown.

2.2. *Content*

> Jezile begins with a close-up of a praying mantis on a dune near an ocean beach. A black man with a face painted white appears, wrapped in a white blanket. Next to him is another black man who is well-fed, with his hair trimmed and wearing a red T-shirt and a black leather jacket. The rest of his clothes are black as well. He is also carrying a goat's foot. He offers the first man a piece of bread. This is a temptation, and it ends when the first man discovers that the man in black is the devil and throws him off the dune. But the devil cries: 'This is my country', and images are shown subsequently of a militia (which the television news reveals to be the militia of Herod of Judea) spreading death and destruction. A black woman—all the people in this film are black—flees into a school building and hides under a pile of dead bodies when the militia approaches. She comes out only when the danger has gone. Suddenly a young boy shows up, wearing a white loincloth and some white feathers on his breast. He announces that she will become pregnant.
>
> The child is born in a garage in a township and called Jesus. His birth is greeted by a group of children also wearing white loincloths and white feathers on their heads who sing that the sun will rise in spring and that the people will be united again. Then the film begins to depict the life story of the child, who barely escapes Herod's militia who are killing children. Suddenly the devil appears again.
>
> Much later Jesus and his friends leave the township to look for a job. He is bald, has no moustache and beard and is dressed in a blue and black chequered shirt and jeans. Herod has died long ago and the Democratic Coalition now holds power. While they are approaching a railway station, a Mercedes stops and two men called Caiaphas and Annas step out.

They unload weapons from a train that had just stopped at the station and put them in their car.

After arriving in a township near the city, Jesus and his friends find jobs. But Jesus gathers a group of men and women whose names are very similar to those of Jesus' disciples in the gospels. Jesus stimulates them to combat poverty, epidemics and brute force and to work for democratic change. But they will not need any weapons. He passes round a plastic sack and some of those present, including Judas, put their weapons in it.

In the next scene a group follows a scantily clothed woman called Mary Magdalene. A man pours kerosene over her and then looks for a match. As Mary Magdalene begins to moan Jesus sees her and tells the man to leave her alone. The man replies: 'She is a prostitute, an adulterous woman. She spreads illness and corruption. Don't we have the right to punish her? Do you agree or not?' A soldier appears suddenly and orders the group to disperse. The people do so, but the man with the match continues to ask Jesus: 'Do you agree or not?' A disciple gathers up her ornaments that had fallen to the ground. Jesus asks the woman: 'Where are the people accusing you?' 'They are gone,' she says. 'Go,' Jesus answers, 'I will not accuse you.' Jesus then leaves, but she follows him and kneels down in front of him to thank him. 'Go,' Jesus says and she leaves. The black man with the goat's foot looks at her.

After this Mary Magdalene brings a bracelet to two female pawnbrokers, and with the money they give her for the bracelet she buys a small bottle of perfume. In the meantime, Jesus and his disciples have gone to a wedding party. Mary Magdalene comes into the party tent, calling 'Jesus, Jesus,' but the women in the tent attempt to stop her. Nonetheless, she succeeds in reaching Jesus, upon which she opens the bottle, pours the perfume over his feet and washes them with her hair. Judas complains that the money used for buying the perfume could better have been used for the poor. Then a rich woman, the hostess, rebukes Jesus, but Jesus replies that she did not provide water for his feet. Finally, Jesus turns to Mary Magdalene and says: 'Whatever you did belongs to the past. Go in peace.' She stands up and some other women approach her and let her join their group.

The government is increasingly restricting the liberty of the people. In the township Jesus gives a long sermon in which he urges his listeners to seek unity and justice and to understand what is going on in the news in the papers and on the television. Meanwhile, a woman climbs over the roofs of the barracks of the township with her sick daughter and reaches Jesus after a long trip. He heals the child. Later, he enters a shed where people are singing mourning songs. Jesus walks to the coffin with the dead body, while someone is filming everything with a video camera. It is from the perspective of this video camera that the film presents what happens now. Jesus commands that the coffin be opened. A woman asks

him to leave the dead person alone, but Jesus repeats his command. The coffin is opened and Jesus lays his hands on the top of the coffin and seems to pray. He then lays his hand on the face of the man in the coffin. He suddenly removes his hand, but here the video recording stops. In the next scene, which is no longer shown from the perspective of the video recording, we see a disciple painting a mural of Jesus standing near a coffin in which a man is sitting up. In the meantime a song of hope is heard. The video recording turns out to have been made by Judas who brings it to Caiaphas and Annas. They, however, disapprove of it.

The television news shows the governor saying that the government has to intervene to protect democracy, and therefore an interim government will be installed. Jesus preaches again, standing on the roof of a power station in the township. A platoon of soldiers approaches the crowd and Peter fetches a stone to stone them, but Jesus descends from the power station and stops him. Judas records everything on video again and brings the recording to Caiaphas and Annas later, but, again, they are very displeased.

Standing in a jeep, Jesus travels through the township while the people are singing. In the meantime, soldiers are wandering around the neighbourhood, but they still refrain from any action.

Caiaphas and Annas meet Jesus later. They explain to him that they have finally attained a share in power, having been asked to participate in the interim government. Furthermore, they warn Jesus that he represents only a minority, but Jesus claims that everybody has his or her own vote. Moreover, no group has a monopoly on truth or on intelligence. He says that Caiaphas is being used by the ruling elite and walks away.

The situation becomes more threatening. Jesus and his disciples are now in his mother's house in the township. He passes round a tin filled with beer and everyone takes a sip. In the meantime, infrared flashbacks show shots of dead children and of a woman crying near the dead body of her husband. Jesus says that one of his disciples will betray him and then sends Judas away. He goes outside later with some of his disciples. Some men, including Judas who is still carrying his video camera, pick Jesus up and take him to Caiaphas and Annas in a small room in a large factory building. They threaten him and start to beat and kick him. Shortly afterwards, they take Jesus' dead body away in a car and put it in a pit, where they fire a salvo of bullets into it—just to be sure—and bury it.

Alerted by a man named Hundred who buried Jesus but later regretted his action, Jesus' mother Mary finds the spot where her son is buried. She begins to dig furiously. Later some friends of her come and help her, and then Hundred, Mary and some others bring the body to the township in a small lorry. Mary sits on the back of the lorry with the body of her son across her stomach, a modern *pietà*. Back in the township the body is hung on a cross and placed at the top of a hill. When the people of the

township see the body on the cross, many of them make the journey to the top of the hill. Then Mary starts to sing: 'This land is plunged into darkness.'[20] Others join in and, little by little, the people begin to dance. The army threatens to intervene and a helicopter flies over. Army lorries filled with soldiers ride over the roads of the township and many of the people on the hill flee. A platoon of soldiers climbs up, threatening the people with their machine guns. Their commander orders the remaining persons to disperse, but Mary and those around her do not listen. The soldiers shoot into the air and the group ducks. Then Mary stands up and looks at the dead Jesus on the cross. She goes towards the soldiers, with the group following her. She looks the soldiers in the eye and starts to sing again: 'This land is plunged into darkness.' The group joins in and again start dancing; in the end the soldiers fall back.

In the next scene Jesus again appears. He is alive and, leading a large group of young boys with loincloths and white feathers on their heads, he climbs the hill up to the cross which is now empty. He sings: 'In spring the sun will rise above the mountain. Today we are united.'

The last shot shows a small boy, probably the young Jesus and next to him the following text: 'And God said: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness".' (Gen 1:26).

2.3. *Interpretation*

There are some striking things in this picture that show how African the film is and help to interpret it.[21] The first thing one sees in the movie a praying mantis. André Brink writes in his novel, *Praying Mantis*:

> In the world of the Khoikhoin, as everybody knows, the mantis is revered as the harbinger of good fortune; its Afrikaans name, *hotnotsgod*, even means 'Hottentot God' (Brink: 8).

The message of the shot is clear: this film is about God. The praying mantis announces a time of good fortune: God himself enters the human world.[22] Then Jesus appears, his face painted with white clay. This means that he is in the middle of an initiation ritual, a ceremony in which he will become human but will simultaneously be exposed to the divine. White refers to the divine, just as the white feathers and

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[20] This resembles a quotation from Isaiah 9:2, a text used in the Advent liturgy.

[21] Dr. Jan G. Platvoet, an expert in African religion, saw the film and wrote a comment on the picture in which he also referred to some literature. I will refer to his comment in more detail below.

[22] This becomes obvious in the following parts of Brink's novel on the life of Cupido Cockroach.

the white loincloths do. This is shown each time the boys appear with their white loincloths and white feathers on their heads. They do the things the angels do in the gospels, such as announcing the birth of Jesus in the song of the angels after his birth.

The devil often appears in the initiation rituals as well. In the picture he is represented by a well-fed man with hair neatly trimmed, wearing a red T-shirt, a black leather jacket and black trousers. He resembles the young men in South Africa who turn to crime. The goat's foot is a symbol for Satan, which is also known in Europe. When Jesus throws him from the top of the dune, Satan's final cry is: 'This is my country.' He thus wishes to make clear that this world is his possession. At the same time, the following scenes clarify what this world includes. It is a world dominated by threats and death. Militias are running the country, men who want to remain in power at all costs, even if it requires the use of violence.

Jesus starts to resist this but does so in a non-violent and democratic manner. He inspires the people, but he is not only a political leader. He also heals, just like African healers do, and even raises somebody from the dead. The hope Jesus brings transcends the boundaries of human possibilities.

Nevertheless, the threat remains and every time the threat increases, the devil appears. He does not give up. The threat becomes even greater: Jesus' life is in danger, certainly when he refuses to be silenced by Caiaphas. Shortly afterwards he passes round a tin filled with beer, an old African custom in rituals in which the Africans commemorated their ancestors (Berglund: 209–214). But, however African this may be, at the same time it recalls the celebration of Eucharist or the Holy Supper. Moreover, the infrared flashbacks reveal that this ceremony is also a commemoration of the suffering of their own past as well as of other people in their country.

The singing and dancing around the cross with the dead body of Jesus is also very African, although it has to be admitted that the exposure of a dead body stems from the time of Apartheid, when the families of martyrs put their dead bodies on display to prove that the victims had died because of torture and not as the result of accidents (Website *Broadway Theatre*). The dance recalls the *ukigiya*, a dance in which the performers wish to combat evil. They appeal to the ancestors to act as well. Often, the dance was directed against an invisible enemy or, in

case of war, against a visible enemy (Berglund: 230–231, 235–237). In this case, it is directed against oppression and injustice. The soldiers fall back indeed, for the enemy they represent is not strong enough to enforce its will on the people. This is of great importance with regard to the following scene. In this scene Jesus climbs the hill followed by the angels. It seems that the dance was successful in the sense that the deceased Jesus resembles an 'ancestor' in his activity and comes into action, thus keeping the hope of a good future alive. It is not at all strange in African Christian theology to regard Jesus as an ancestor (Küster: 70–76).

But perhaps it is possible to go one step further. The cross is empty—which also may mean that Jesus is alive in this scene. The sequence with Jesus raising a man from the dead keeps the perspective open, which creates space for another interpretation, namely that this scene shows the resurrected Jesus. A third possible interpretation is that Jesus is now in the world of the angels, in heaven with God. But, given the rest of the picture, this does not make him powerless, for whenever an angel appears in JEZILE, the power of the devil is diminished. The comment accompanying the last shot is decisive: the human being is the image of God. In other words, that human being is the spectator: What is stopping him from acting?

Jesus has a strong personality in this picture. He knows what he wants and also knows when he has to act. But at the same time he radiates strong compassion. He is completely convinced—which he also preaches—that the way of democracy and non-violence is the right one. He thus inspires people and gives them hope even if the power of death is real. At the same time, this perspective of hope is kept open but not in a cheap and easy way. The last shots of Jesus can be interpreted as new life, as a new beginning transcending the boundaries of human life. At the same, however, a less far-reaching interpretation remains possible.

Jan G. Platvoet, whom I have asked to comment (see note 21) writes:

> There are no white people in the film. Nonetheless, it is obvious to every spectator that the battle against Apartheid provides the framework in which the biblical narrative is told. In this way the ANC's defeat of the Afrikaans Apartheid receives a biblical Christian legitimacy. Thus, the battle against Apartheid becomes the most important form for the life story of Jesus Christ.

It is precisely the absence of any white people in the picture that raises doubts about this interpretation. JEZILE was released in 2006. At that time, the Apartheid regime had already been gone for more than 11 years, whereas another major problem had emerged in the meantime in Africa: the fact that in many African countries black rulers were using the same methods as the Apartheid regime. Herod is a black man—and so are the leaders of the Democratic Coalition. Therefore, a more relevant interpretation is more probable, namely that JEZILE is a critique of all African regimes that set aside their ideals of non-violence and democracy and built their governments on the power of the army and the militias, on intimidation and violence (see also the website of *Broadway Theatre*). JEZILE confronts them—since many of these rulers claim to be Christians—with a black Jesus, so they can no longer ignore his message by resorting to the argument of racism and colonialism. At the same time, the picture is an appeal to stand up and follow Jesus in Africa as well, because then 'in spring the sun will rise above the mountains'.

3. THE JESUS FILM OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHRISTIANS

3.1. *Introduction*

On 27 October, 2006 COLOR OF THE CROSS, a film lasting 81 minutes, premiered in various theatres and churches in the United States of America. The film had been screened earlier, however, on 28 May 2006 at the Cannes film festival. The director was Jean-Claude LaMarre, an African-American of Haitian parents (Website of the English *Wikipedia*), who himself played the role of Jesus. So COLOR OF THE CROSS became the second Jesus film with a black Jesus. Various disciples, including Judas, Philip, Bartholomew and Simon (not Peter!),[23] are black as well, and, of course, Jesus' own family members, i.e. his mother Mary, his father Joseph (who is still alive in this movie), his two younger brothers James and Ezra and his two sisters Ruth and Leah are black as well. Most other people are white, including Caiaphas and the other members of the Sanhedrin and the Romans. Mary Magdalene is of Iranian descent, but it is very probable that many spectators considered

[23] In fact, both Bartholomew and Simon are Indians, but because of their dark skin they can pass themselves off as 'black African Americans'.

her to be Hispanic. The team that produced the film was comprised not only of Jean-Claude LaMarre but also of Jessie Levostre, Kenneth L. Halsband and Rev Cecile 'Chip' Murray, who, until November 2004, was pastor of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles. He is mentioned as the film's main producer. Rocky Mountain Pictures released the movie (*Variety Film Reviews*, 26 October 2006). The First African Methodist Episcopal Church of Los Angeles is a church of African-American Protestants founded in 1872, but the movement leading to the establishment of the African Methodist Church originated already in 1787 in Philadelphia (Website *First A.M.E. Church*).

The film was shot around Santa Clarita in rugged terrain north of Los Angeles (*Variety Film Reviews*, October 26, 2006). It consists mostly of medium shots and close-ups that make no use of natural backdrops.

Jean-Claude LaMarre has been very active in the world of film as an actor, writer, director and producer since 1992. He was at the helm of several features including BROTHERS IN ARMS (Website *IMDb*). It is clear, however, that the production of the picture was also endorsed by the community of African-American Protestants, for whom it seems to be of great importance that a film was produced with a black Jesus. On 5 March 2008 a follow-up was even released called RESURRECTION, which was about what happened after Jesus' resurrection (Website *IMDb*). Although Todd McCarthy, the reviewer of *Variety Film Reviews* was very critical of COLOR OF THE CROSS, the picture appears to have had some success in particular among African-American Christians (*Variety Film Reviews*, 26 October 2006). It is not impossible that they see many of consequences of the discrimination against black people in the USA in the film, since it suggests that Jesus was born in a manger because of the discriminatory lodging laws in Bethlehem. One of the most important questions among the rabbis is whether the Messiah can be black. Most of them answer in the negative. This probably reflects the ongoing discrimination against blacks, many of whom seriously attempt to live religiously and morally good lives but are still seen as second-class people. In McCarthy's eyes, the pace of the film is tedious, '…lacking the drama of Jesus' trial and the passion, as well as the substance of his teachings, LaMarre's turgid take has very little to offer dramatically or inspirationally' (*Variety Film Reviews*, 26 October 2006).

3.2. *Content*

Color of the Cross is about the last 48 hours of Jesus' life. Moreover, the whole story does not take place in Jerusalem but in Arimathea, a small town northwest of Jerusalem. The filmmakers were probably attempting to avoid various problems that could arise if they had chosen Jerusalem. It gave them more freedom to develop their own narrative. The picture dovetails with the recent rediscovery of the black Jews leading to the transport of many Falasha Jews from Ethiopia to Israel in the 1980s. According to the filmmakers, there were also black Jews living in Palestine at the time of Jesus—Jesus was even one of them. Jesus wears a moustache and a beard, a white robe and has a white stole over his head. When he prays, he usually speaks Hebrew and the words he addresses to God while hanging on the cross are also in Hebrew. In addition, his name is changed into its more Hebrew form of Joshua. Furthermore, all songs are in Hebrew, for example, 'El Shaddai', which is sung just after Jesus breathes his last. All this, of course, serves to reinforce the Jewish nature of the Jewish people, including the black Jews among them.

> The picture starts with the credit titles, while thunder is rumbling. Then we see a panorama of mountaintops surrounded by white clouds and above them a blue sky. The scene shifts to the market of Arimathea where a Roman soldier is intimidating two of Joshua's disciples and the older one gives vent to his deep hatred of the Romans. Caiaphas then appears and promises the Roman military commander that Arimathea will be quiet this year during Passover. The commander asks the high priest how it feels to hand another Jew over to the Roman authorities. After a long silence Caiaphas admits that it does not feel good, but it is his responsibility to protect the law of God. If he is wrong and one of these prophets turns out to be the Messiah, then God will judge. The next sequence consists of a dialogue between Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who are both waiting for another rabbi, Gamaliel. Nicodemus asks: 'Do you believe that this dark-skinned Nazarene is really Him?' Joseph answers: 'I don't know, Nicodemus. But one thing I am sure of. If this Joshua is indeed the Messiah, I fear we may be too late.'
>
> On his way to Arimathea, Joshua sends two disciples, Andrew and John, into the town to prepare Passover in one of the houses there. But before they depart they have to turn in their daggers. 'My Father will protect them', Joshua says. In his parents' house Joseph, his daughters and youngest son Ezra are also preparing Passover. His other son James enters. He wants to join Joshua, but his sister forbids it because it would break his mother's heart. Gamaliel enters the home of Joseph of Arimathea and

says that the Sanhedrin will meet that night and Joshua will probably be arrested. Gamaliel also says that Joshua knows the Torah better than most rabbis, but he is black. To say that he is the Messiah is blasphemy. Nicodemus says that the Torah does not say anything about the Messiah's appearance and Joseph adds that he is a Jew despite the colour of his skin. In the meantime, Andrew and John find the house where Joshua and his disciples will have the Passover meal. Joshua and his other disciples build a camp near Gethsemane. A young man finds a black sheep and Joshua takes it into his arms. 'Such beautiful fur,' Joshua says, 'If only mankind would embrace that which is different. Black sheep.' The disciples horse around while building the camp but Joshua looks at the sky. Thunder rumbles. Thaddeus is telling a parable, while Bartholomew is silently enjoying the good atmosphere. Meanwhile, Joshua has gone off alone, and again thunder rumbles. Joshua is praying, literally talking to God. Joshua's parents are still preparing Passover. Mary cries, expressing her desire to see Joshua. Then she asks Joseph: 'Do you think they're doing this because he's black?' 'No,' Joseph replies, 'they're doing this because he's the Messiah.'

Thomas approaches Joshua and asks him: 'How does it feel to be different?' Joshua chuckles and answers: 'In my Father's eyes we are all different, yet we are all the same.' Joshua tells Thomas how his mother was denied lodging at a local inn in Bethlehem because she was so different, and was forced to give birth in a manger. Thomas says he understands, since he is a poor fisherman and suffers abuse because of his status. Joshua says: 'My Father was right. We are all the same.'

Later, Joshua and his disciples walk secretly through the town to the house where they will have their Passover meal. Now three Passover celebrations are shown: one in the house of Joshua's parents, one with Joshua himself and his disciples, and one in a group consisting of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and five other rabbis. But whereas the cup is passed around and shared in the celebration of Joshua's parents and in that of Joshua and his disciples, each of the rabbis drinks from his own cup. Then Joshua announces that one of them will betray him. The air grows thick with tension. When Peter summons the traitor to come forward, Thomas asks Peter how he knows that he is not the traitor himself. Peter becomes very angry, fetches his dagger and threatens to kill Thomas. After Bartholomew and later Philip ask him, Joshua intervenes. Then some disciples claim that they love Joshua most. Outside the house a man and a woman hear them and they decide to inform the high priest, for there is a reward for Joshua's capture.

When the disciples start to discuss which of them is the greatest, Joshua decides to wash their feet. In the meantime Joseph of Arimathea declares that he believes that Joshua may be the Messiah. Gamaliel accepts that Joshua may be a prophet but not the Messiah. Nicodemus and another

rabbi point out that Joshua is from the line of David and had been born in Bethlehem. 'As countless others', another rabbi says. Then there is a knock on their door. The man and woman say that they know where the black Nazarene is. Meanwhile, Joshua introduces the celebration of the Holy Supper. Suddenly the Romans knock on the door, but the owner of the house denies that he has seen anything. They intimidate him and look around, but when they do not find anything, they leave. Joshua says that they have to leave quickly. When Peter says that he will see Joshua to safety, the latter announces that Peter will deny him and that all of them will forsake him. At the same time Caiaphas is informed of Joshua's presence. Joshua and his disciples leave the house, and Joshua tells them to go to Gethsemane. While leaving the house John threatens to kill Judas with his dagger, but Judas escapes. Later, Mary Magdalene meets Judas at the market and offers him refuge in her house. In the meantime Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus attempt to counter a decision taken by Caiaphas to arrest Joshua. Judas tries to seduce Mary Magdalene, but she refuses. She suddenly feels that there is something wrong and asks Judas if he wants to betray Joshua. Judas answers that he only wishes to force Joshua's hand into following his, i.e. Judas', way. 'Violence is the only language the Romans speak.' Mary Magdalene insists that Joshua's way of peace will succeed much faster than that of the army of Zealots. Judas makes a strong and violent attempt to kiss her. She resists, but he throws her on her bed.

In the Sanhedrin witnesses are asked to come forward to witness against Joshua. Some do testify. At the same time, Mary Magdalene knocks at the door of the house of Joshua's parents. His sisters had arrived just before her and when they discover that it is Mary Magdalene they refuse to let her in, because she is a prostitute. Joseph, however, intervenes, saying that he accepts her, because his son forgave her her sins. Mary Magdalene tells them that Judas will betray Joshua, that Joshua is in Gethsemane and that he has to be warned. Thunder rumbles. Joshua is talking with his disciples—who are afraid—in Gethsemane. Joshua goes off alone to pray.

In spite of the fierce defence by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, Caiaphas threatens to arrest Joshua. Then a witness declares that Joshua has said that the only way to enjoy the kingdom of heaven is through him. 'He said through him, because he is the Son of God.' Some rabbis grumble and Caiaphas shouts 'He blasphemes!' Now Nicodemus remembers the young black boy in the temple long ago. In a flashback the boy states that his wisdom rivals the knowledge of the rabbis because he is the Son of God. They had laughed at the time. Another witness recalls the raising of Lazarus, which is interpreted by one of the rabbis as an act contrary to the will of God, since God had decided to let Lazarus die. Joseph of Arimathea shakes his head. Now the Romans enter and bring Judas, who tells them that Joshua is in Gethsemane.

In Gethsemane Joshua talks with his disciples who want to go elsewhere, but Joshua does not. Thunder rumbles. Joshua goes off alone again and prays. He implores God in Hebrew: 'Father, don't let me do this'. The sound of thunder is heard repeatedly during this time. Joshua later crawls over the ground, shouts 'Eli!' and then runs away. He finds his disciples sleeping and rebukes them for not being able to watch with him for one hour. Again thunder rumbles. At the same time, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are still defending Joshua, but Caiaphas replies that he only wants to have Joshua brought in for interrogation. He does not condemn him, but Joseph of Arimathea says that having him brought in for interrogation is the same thing. Meanwhile, Joshua's mother and Mary Magdalene are on their way to Gethsemane, but then they see the Roman soldiers. Joshua is giving one last commandment: 'After I die my work and message must not die. They will win only if they succeed in silencing my message.' Joshua subsequently appoints James and John to speak in his name and to tell the others to sell everything they have of value so that they can spread Joshua's message all over the world. When one of the disciples points out that there are only twelve of them, Joshua replies that twelve will become a thousand and a thousand ten thousand, ten thousand a million and so on. Peter promises that they will carry out his command.

Then the Roman soldiers arrive. When the Roman commander asks which of them is Joshua of Nazareth, Joshua says that he is the one they are looking for. At that moment Peter comes forward claiming to be Joshua, but the Roman officer says that he is lying. He is not black enough. The commander orders his soldiers to arrest all of them and in the chaos that follows Judas comes forward and kisses Joshua. Someone shouts. Joshua calms them down and heals a soldier whose ear was cut off during the chaos. Joshua is then taken away and the disciples flee.

Thunder rumbles. The panorama with the mountains, clouds and blue sky of the beginning of the film returns. Joshua is seen hanging on the cross, the crown of thorns on his head and his body covered in blood. A large crowd stands in front of him, among whom some rabbis are visible, including Joseph of Arimathea. Mary, his mother, and Mary Magdalene are also present. Joshua cries out: 'Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani' ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'). His mother begins to cry and weep. Then Joshua says to one of the men who are crucified with him: 'Join me in paradise.' His mother is still weeping. Now Joshua says: 'Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do' and then gasps. The screen blackens and thunder rumbles again.

The last sequence of the picture is a flashback showing Joshua amongst his disciples. Thomas asks what will be different now and Joshua laughs, replying: 'In my Father's eyes we are all different, yet we are all the same.'

3.3. *Retrospection*

Although Color of the Cross takes some liberty in representing the gospel narrative, the background of these texts is clearly recognizable. The picture consists of 66 scenes, 15 of which are found in Matthew, 14 in Mark, 14 in Luke as well and 10 in John. Four scenes are found in all gospels. It can be concluded, moreover, that the influence of all four gospels was almost equal, with John having the least. Strikingly enough, Jesus is depicted in the film as praying often. As already stated, he speaks Hebrew in his prayers. He calls God 'Eli', which literally means 'my God' but is sometimes translated by 'Father', thus emphasizing the Christian character of the film. It is these prayers that reveal Jesus' intimate relationship with God.[24] The prayers are surrounded by and interwoven with thunder, the sound of which is heard ten times in the picture. Is this the voice of God? It is not clear. Nonetheless, it emphasizes that Jesus' relationship with God is first and foremost a mystical one. Jesus also radiates a certain tranquillity, even though he becomes very agitated in Gethsemane and on Golgotha. These are the times he speaks Hebrew. Thus, Color of the Cross presents not only a black Jesus but also a mystical Jesus. Although the film in general follows classical film narration, the scenes in which Jesus is praying, including those in Gethsemane, reflect art-cinema narration.

The release of Resurrection could be caused by the success of Color of the Cross, but it can also be a correction, since it seems that in LaMarre's first film the preaching of Jesus' message is Jesus' greatest concern, whereas his resurrection plays hardly any role.

The cultural context of Color of The Cross is the community of African- American Christians, in particular that of Protestant African-Americans. This context shows great similarity to Western Christianity. It is thus not very different from Western Jesus pictures with respect to culture. But it is the fact that the Messiah could also have been a black man that is important, since it identifies Jesus more directly with the black people who are still suffering from discrimination. The idea that Jesus was discriminated against as well or, even more, was

[24] The only other Jesus film to give a similar representation of Jesus' relationship with the Father is a French film entitled Jésus produced by Serge Moati in 1999. (Langkau: 72–73).

crucified because the great majority of the Jewish rabbis refused to accept that the Messiah could have been black is what gives this film its particular edge.

Much in the movie reflects the reality of American daily life from the perspective of those who suffer from it: the racism of the Roman military men reflects the same attitude among many white policemen, and the racism of the Jewish religious leaders reflects the attitude of some religious leaders in the USA at this time as well. The words of Caiaphas reveal that the attitude of the religious leaders is even more vicious than that of the Romans. Caiaphas admits that it does not feel good to hand a fellow Jew over to the Romans, but it is his responsibility to protect the law of God. In other words, the protection of the law of God is more important than the protection of a fellow Jew who is black, even if this fellow Jew may be the Messiah—a possibility that Caiaphas does not completely exclude. He says to the Roman commander: 'If I am wrong and one of those prophets is the real Messiah, let history judge me.' The Roman commander despises the high priest deeply, as he despises all Jews who betray their compatriots, thus underscoring the abject nature of their state of mind. It is quite probable that this reflects the opinion of the filmmakers.

4. Siding with the Powerless and Victims of Discrimination

In retrospect, the following points are remarkable. First of all, Jesus sides with the powerless and victims of discrimination. He does so in all four films, although more explicitly in the last three pictures, Shanti Sandesham, Jezile and Color of the Cross. Therefore, these films criticize not only the cultural element or the Western character of the Western Jesus films but also a form of Christianity in which Jesus' compassion for the powerless and victims of discrimination does not result in concrete acts of resistance against those defending the status quo of injustice. The films are absolutely political. There are, of course, also Western Jesus films with a political perspective, in particular Pasolini's Il Vangelo, but many Western pictures prefer to focus on the religious element in Jesus' life.

Second, all four films clothe the life story of Jesus in the culture of their own milieu. Nonetheless, three of them, Karuna Mayudu,

Shanti Sandesham and Color of the Cross attempt to pay attention to the historical context of Jesus' life. Only Jezile places Jesus in a contemporary context and only Godspell did this in the West. It is obvious that, although the filmmakers wanted to fit in with their own cultural environment, they also wanted to maintain a clear relationship with the biblical sources. Clothing the life story in one's own cultural context does not mean completely cutting off all ties with the biblical tradition—on the contrary.

Karuna Mayudu and Shanti Sandesham follow classical film narration because of their Indian context, since this style is common to most Indian films. In Color of the Cross, which was produced in the most Western context, some influence of art film narration is palpable.

The appearance of Jesus is remarkable. It is only in Jezile that he does not have long hair, a moustache and beard. As a result, he looks like Max Wallinger's image of Jesus (see section 3.1 of Chapter Two). In other words, even in different cultures the pictorial conventions for the appearance of Jesus are followed, with Jezile as the sole exception.

A similar observation can be made with regard to the theology of the four movies. It seems that all of them present a classical theological portrait of Christ. Nonetheless, Color of the Cross and Jezile leave some room for a more liberal interpretation. In Jezile, however, Jesus' raising of a man from the dead indicates that this film also keeps the perspective open for the resurrection of Jesus. This perspective is not deliberately left open in Color of the Cross but neither is it denied. Moreover, the new film Resurrection, which is promoted as Color of the Cross II, may be a correction in the direction of a more traditional interpretation. One of the reasons for the more traditional perspective may be that the reality of Jesus' resurrection is a problem for many Westerners[25] but less so for the millions living in other cultures.

A consequence of the inculturation of Jesus is that Jesus is separated from the Western context in which so many Western Jesus films display him. Remarkably, this did not result in having him return to his original cultural context. They did not make him more Jewish, although again there was a certain exception: in Color of the Cross Jesus is clearly

[25] It is precisely this that explains why Color of the Cross has some indications of a more liberal standpoint, since this is the only film discussed in the present chapter that is produced in a Western country.

a black Jew, praying in Hebrew to his God, but this was, of course, to emphasize the claim of the filmmakers that black people are as Christian as other (white) Christians. His Jewishness was intended less to relate him to the Jewish communities all over the world than to underscore the authenticity of the black Christian communities. Nonetheless, the theology of COLOR OF THE CROSS is the most Jewish.

In general, however, the movement went in the opposite direction: Jesus became more universal, which, in fact, puts him more in line with the claim expressed by many Christians that Jesus is the universal Lord of all people, wherever they live. Thus, inculturation resulted in freeing Jesus from Western culture and thus universalizing him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The introduction of film caused a great upheaval in all great religions of the world. It meant a new confrontation with the ancient question concerning the permissibility of depicting transcendence or, to put it in a more popular way: is one allowed to make images of God?

Except for Hindus, many adherents of the other religions feel some or even great hesitation at seeing the central figure of their own religion in a feature film. At the same time, many other followers of those very same religions are eager to watch these movies. It seems that it was primarily the religious leaders and theologians or religious thinkers who objected, although there were almost always those with a positive attitude.

This chapter will present both the observations made and the conclusions drawn in the previous chapters, focusing on the following topics. First, a short sketch will be given of the representations of Jesus, Rama, Buddha and Muhammad in film with reference to their relationship to the visual and theological portrayals of these figures in their own religions. The next section will be devoted to the narration modes of the various films, while the following section will discuss the special position of the actors playing the roles of Jesus and Rama, and the significance of the absence with regard to Muhammad in The Message. The fourth section will deal with the importance of shooting a film in a sacred environment, and the fifth will look at films produced outside their own cultural contexts. The sixth and final section will begin with a discussion about the meaning of depicting or prohibiting any depiction of figures representing God. Then, starting from the different attitudes in the various religions towards this issue, it will explore the points of view laypeople and religious authorities have with regard to features representing the most important figures of their religions and the effect of this on the issue of depicting transcendence and the acceptance of these films.

1. Between Tradition and Creativity: The Importance of the Audience

The cinematic depiction of Jesus almost always followed tradition, which means that in films he always had long dark hair, a moustache and a beard. Godspell and Jezile were the only ones that portrayed Jesus with a different appearance. The films followed tradition theologically as well. He was depicted as the Son of God, truly God and truly human, but with some emphasis on his status as the suffering servant promised in the book of Isaiah. Films that presented another view of Jesus often became controversial and thus did not become box-office successes.

In their representations of Jesus the filmmakers followed various approaches: the passion play and the musical—both of which were more theatrical—the biblical, the historical, even including a documentary, and one based on Jesus' subjectivity. With regard to the biblical approach it is remarkable that it was not until the release of Pasolini's Il Vangelo secondo Matteo in 1964 that the first picture that followed only one gospel was made. The filmmakers almost always preferred to mix the four gospels in their films in their own way. As to the historical approach, it remains baffling that a Jewish actor was never asked to play Jesus. Most portrayals of Jesus in Western Jesus films are very Anglo-Saxon, even including the blue eyes. True to its nature as a documentary, Rosselini's Il Messia did not depict Jesus performing any miracle. Miracles were also scarce in the 1961 King of Kings, but this issue became less of a problem later. Scorcese even added new ones. Many films were mixtures of the approaches mentioned above, usually the biblical and historical ones. A very interesting approach was the one followed in Jésus de Montréal, in which an actor playing Jesus in a passion play identifies himself with him, which has far-reaching consequences in his private life, particularly with regard to his attitude towards the people around him and towards society. In the end he dies but continues to exist in an altered form, thus metaphorically recalling Jesus' death and resurrection.

With respect to Hinduism, the present study concentrated on Rama, one of the main divine figures in this religion. The depiction of Rama also closely followed religious tradition. At the same time, it fit in with traditional Indian theatre, in particular its Parsi variety. Although the first Rama film appeared to present Rama as an almighty and omniscient God, critical voices became increasingly louder in subsequent films. Rama's character and appearance became less and less perfect

and therefore simultaneously more and more human, while the monkeys and the demons were increasingly humanized as well. The strict demarcation between good and evil became blurred, since evil persons were given good qualities and good people became partially fallible. The battle between good and evil was something that took place in heart of every character. However, in the end Rama was supreme, despite the less attractive features of his character; in the end he remained a true God.

The trend in the cinematic depiction of Rama reflected developments in the literature on Rama more than it did developments in the visual representation of him. In the visual representation he developed more and more into the great lord who deserved the devotion of those who sought refuge with him. Nonetheless, his two arms revealed that he was still a human being, although his conic crown and royal vestments made it clear that, as a world ruler, he was the greatest of all of human beings. More critical voices were heard in the literature, something that was more or less reflected in the portrayals of Ram Rajya and Sampoorna Ramayan in particular.

Unfortunately, it was possible to watch only four Buddha features. Remarkably, three of these four Buddha films did not continue Buddha's life story up until his death. Two ended just after his enlightenment, whereas The Light of Asia ended when his former consort became his first disciple. The Japanese Buddha film Shaka and Tathagata Buddha did show what happened in the period after his enlightenment but, unfortunately, it remains unclear as to what the Japanese film exactly showed and if it did inform the audience about his death. Both documentary films relate his complete life story.

The appearance of the Enlightened One was inspired more by later Buddhist tradition than by what is known from the ancient sources. Although these ancient texts state that he cut off his hair after his decision to follow the path of asceticism, in the films he did not cut it off. In The Little Buddha, Buddha and Tathagata Buddha he even had his hair shaped in the fashion seen on the great majority of Buddha statues, with a bulge on the top of his head. In The Light of Asia his hair did not change at all; only his headdress became somewhat simpler.

The Awakened One remained a human being in The Light of Asia and Tathagata Buddha, which corresponded most with the oldest parts of Buddhist tradition. The Light of Asia made one exception, however: when the prince hesitated at leaving the palace he did hear a

divine call. Any divine intervention is absent from TATHAGATA BUDDHA, but Buddha's enlightenment is accompanied by supernatural phenomena. In THE LITTLE BUDDHA Buddha remains human during his life in the palace, but in his struggle against Mara in the final stages before his enlightenment he turned out to be able to defeat various supernatural powers. THE LITTLE BUDDHA followed the oldest parts of the Buddhist tradition in its narration of Buddha's youth and renunciation, but in its portrayal of the last stages before the enlightenment of the Awakened One it looked to the Buddhist texts dating from 2nd century BCE and onwards. In BUDDHA the Enlightened One appeared from the outset as a person clothed with divine qualities, worshipped even by the gods. This reflected the descriptions of the Awakened One found in biographical texts dating from the first century CE and onwards. The fact that both these films end when he becomes enlightened underscores the hero aspect in their portrayal of Buddha. It was as if the latter part of his life was not very interesting now that he had proven himself capable of subduing all evil forces. Remarkably enough, the Four Noble Truths as well as the Eightfold Path were omitted in the first three features, which emphasized again that the filmmakers were more interested in representing his capacity to vanquish the powers of evil than in proclaiming his message.

Moustapha Akkad succeeded in producing a beautiful picture, which gave a correct portrayal of Muhammad's life. The depiction followed Islamic tradition quite accurately, the biggest departure being that Akkad painted the Apostle as a man of peace who rejected any violence, using it only if he was compelled to, as in the battle of Badr. The film omitted at least two things narrated in Muslim tradition: the deteriorating relationship with the Jews and the violent solutions the Apostle sometimes chose. The prohibitions of the religious authorities also modified the representation of the Prophet, with the result that a number of figures around him were given a more prominent role, whereas the absence of his wives led to a view of Muhammad as celibate—which made him more acceptable to many Christians. Moreover, the film emphasized the great similarity of Islam and Christianity. 'What Christ says and what…Muhammad says are like two rays from the same lamp.' All this makes clear that THE MESSAGE was directed at a Western, Christian audience in order to show that Islam was of the same high and peaceful level as Christianity, 'like two rays from the same lamp'.

It can be concluded that the cinematic representation of the religious personalities in film mostly followed the more conservative views of tradition. The risks attached to a more modern representation were probably too great, since there would then be a considerable chance that the film would not become a box-office success. There was some space for criticism in the representation of Rama, particularly in his attitude towards his consort Sita, who had been so loyal to him in even the most severe circumstances. All Buddha features but one are remarkable because they omit a large part of his life—almost everything after his enlightenment. The most important thing to recount about Buddha is his heroic struggle to subdue the powers of evil; his message received virtually no attention in the films. More than likely, the mostly Western audience was not interested in his message. The power of the conservatives in THE MESSAGE is palpable in the way the Prophet is represented: the audience did not see him. Furthermore, the representation is strongly accommodated to the taste of a Western, Christian audience. The depictions of the holy men in the various films clearly reflect the attempts of the filmmakers to take into account their audiences' tastes and preferences and, of course, those of the largest film industries, i.e. the American one with regard to Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad, and the Indian with regard to Rama. Two Jesus films and two Buddha films—all four of them Indian—also take into account the tastes of the Indian audience.

2. FILM, NARRATION MODES AND SUBJECTIVITY

The previous section already pointed out that, when composing their Jesus films, the filmmakers followed various approaches. This also applies to the narration modes they used. Until 1969, however, all of them used what David Bordwell defined as classical narration. Dennis Potter's SON OF MAN, however, followed what Bordwell described as art-cinema narration, which, as already pointed out in paragraph 2.1 of Chapter Two, took its cue from the modern Western novel. The film started with Jesus' internal experiences, thus emphasizing his subjectivity. This mode was also used in other Jesus films later, including JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR, Scorcese's LAST TEMPTATION and in the scenes occurring in Gethsemane in COLOR OF THE CROSS.

All Rama films are in classical narration. Nonetheless, attention is increasingly being paid to Rama's subjectivity. This is not expressed by opting for the modern Western art-cinema narration but by using the Indian *rasa* doctrine, which forms the background of the classical Indian theatre forms. The result is that many films are quite melodramatic. The filmmakers' intention of arousing feelings of *bhakti* (devotion) with the audience only intensified this.

All four films about Buddha also follow classical narration. As one of the two representatives of the tradition of Indian film, BUDDHA makes use of the theatrical forms of classical Indian theatre, thus making this film more melodramatic than the others, which does, however, follow the style used in the Rama pictures.

THE MESSAGE follows the classical narration mode as well. Muhammad's subjectivity is given attention but always through the eyes and voices of others. This increases the distance from the Prophet, of course. Nonetheless, the feature gives a persuasive representation of what the Prophet felt at the most important moments of his life, such as when he hears the voice of the angel Gabriel during his call.

The conclusion seems to be justified that a great number of films do pay attention to the sacred figure's subjectivity, but the modes used to represent it on-screen depend on the cinematic traditions of the culture in which the film was made. In Western films art-cinema narration was used and in Indian films the *rasa* doctrine. The Muhammad film was an exception due to the restrictions imposed by the Muslim authorities. Nonetheless, this film also came very close to depicting the Apostle's subjectivity. Furthermore, another conclusion may be added, namely that the way the films give expression to the subjectivity of the main protagonists reveal how closely cinematic expression is related to the way local literary theatrical traditions of their own context express subjectivity.

3. THE POSITIONS OF THE ACTORS PLAYING THE SACRED FIGURES

The audiences were always very much interested in the persons playing the sacred figures. To prevent the audience from being disappointed by the behaviour of the actor involved, Cecile B. DeMille treated Henry B. Warner, who played Jesus in his THE KING OF KINGS, in a very special way. The filmmaker himself sometimes had a special experience. Franco

Zeffirelli detected a divine radiance surrounding Robert Powell, the actor who played Jesus in his JESUS OF NAZARETH, during his screen test. Afterwards, some actors gave talks and published articles or books on the feelings they had while playing Jesus, in some cases claiming that this had changed them.[1]

The idea that the actor playing a sacred figure has to be considered holy as well also plays a role in the production of Rama films, since the Indian audience treated the actors playing the roles of Rama and Sita in BHARAT MILAP and RAM RAJYA as deities.

No actor played the role of Muhammad in Akkad's picture, but it was precisely this absence that emphasized the Prophet's holiness. Therefore, this absence can also be regarded as a kind of parallel to the holiness ascribed to the actors playing Rama and Sita and the special attitude some filmmakers adopted for the actors playing Jesus.

4. THE SACRED ENVIRONMENT

Three Jesus films, FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS, JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR and JESUS, were shot in Palestine and Egypt where Jesus is assumed to have lived. This enhanced the value and authority of the picture for the spectators in the first case especially. However, although the fact that a film was shot in the Holy Land contributed to its authority, only three Jesus films were shot there.

The idea that a film shot in a sacred environment gave it an extra sacred quality was also important in the production of Phalke's LANKA DAHAN and in Ramanand Sagar's RAMAYAN serial. This means that two of the five great Rama features were shot in a sacred context, and it implies that this fact was probably important.

The LIGHT OF ASIA was shot in an India qualified as 'the land of many wonders and contrasts, where the relic of an age-old civilisation still holds its magic sway over its teeming population'. After these words, the picture's introduction shows the Jama mosque, 'the largest

[1] Bruce Marciano even delivered a sermon after the film WHO IS JESUS?, in which he played Jesus. WHO IS JESUS? was an abbreviated version of MATTHEW, which was produced by Bible Vision International. The film is mentioned in section 2 of Chapter Two as an example of a film that followed the text of the gospel precisely, but because it was not very popular, it was not discussed separately in the present study. Pasolini's IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO was an absolutely better example and was, moreover, more successful.

place of worship in the world', Benares, 'looked upon by Hindoos as the Holy of Holies' and Bodh Gaya, 'famed for its Temple of Buddha'. The message to the audience is clear: they are about to see a film narrating a story shot in the holiest country of the world.

The conclusion may be drawn that in Hinduism especially the sacred environment in which the film was shot was important, since 40% of the great Rama films were made in such a context. The circumstance that only three of the sixteen Jesus biopics discussed in the present study were shot in a sacred environment seems to indicate that this was not really important in Christianity. Otherwise, more filmmakers would have made their films in this region. The introduction of THE LIGHT OF ASIA is interesting. It underscores the holiness of India but does so with a view to a Western audience. This presupposed that it was not only India's holiness but also its exotic character that is important, both qualities underscoring the romantic image the picture wishes to present of the subcontinent.

5. Outside the Cultural Context of the Religions

With regard to the Jesus films, a new approach was followed in India and later in South Africa and the African-American Protestant community of the United States. This approximation placed the narration of Jesus not within its own historical context in the Middle East but in India, Africa or a Jewish community that included black Jews. The musical film GODSPELL can be regarded as a kind of pioneer, since this picture placed Jesus in New York. Nonetheless, in both the Indian films and the African-American COLOR OF THE CROSS the directors attempted to do justice to the historical setting of Jesus' life. All four films show the need felt by a number of people for a representation of the gospel narrative in their own context. Moreover, their pictures included the idea that Jesus is less neutral politically and clearly sides with the oppressed and victims of discrimination. Most likely, the 'Western' Jesus was felt to remain too much in heaven and therefore was not really incarnate in human life, including its injustice and oppression. Therefore, all four films are critiques not only of the Western character of the Jesus films made in the West but also of their political neutrality.

At least one film represents Rama in a foreign context, the countryside of the Indonesian island of Java. But, given the Hindu impact on Javanese culture, the question arises if Java is as strange to the Rama

narrative as India and Africa are to the Jesus narratives. In a certain sense, the island of Java can be regarded as belonging to the area of 'extended India'. Peter Brook made a film of the other great Hindu epic, THE MAHABHARATA, which was actually produced in a foreign context and with actors strange to India.

6. BETWEEN THE VOID, IMAGES AND FILMS: AGAIN A KEY POSITION FOR THE AUDIENCE

The present chapter started with the observation that the introduction of film caused a great upheaval in all the great world religions, since it meant a new confrontation with the ancient debate on the issue if the visual representation of transcendence is permitted and possible or, stated in a more popular way, if one is allowed to make images of God. The Belgian scholar Peter Schmidt once wrote:

> the refusal to depict God was—and still is—one of the strongest expressions of reverence for his transcendent majesty. The fact that nothing is able to represent God conveys without saying so in so many words that there is nothing in the whole creation that can be an adequate reflection of God. God is absolutely without equal. No celestial body, no plant, no animal, no human form can express his essence.… The biblical prohibition against making images also expresses the view that nothing in the universe has a divine dimension. (Schmidt: 110)

Schmidt wrote these words with a view to the Abrahamic religions, which is illustrated in his next sentence:

> Thus, this very prohibition illustrates the immeasurable difference that, in Jewish eyes, exists between YHWH [the God of the Tanakh] and the other deities or all other things in nature considered to be divine. (Schmidt: 110)

Nonetheless, the idea that it is impossible to depict God was also present in Hinduism and Buddhism. There was, however, one difference from the Abrahamic religions. Those who held that it was not possible to depict God were not horrified by the depictions and did not regard the worship of these images as idolatry. They simply tolerated it, thinking that these worshippers had not yet attained the level of seeing things as they really are. Furthermore, the images helped the worshippers to practise their faith.

Perhaps is it better to speak here about depicting transcendence rather than about depicting God, since many Buddhists argue that Buddhism

is not actually a religion since it does not have a God. Nonetheless, *nibbana* (or *nirvana*)[2] is often regarded as a reality with a transcendent dimension. In an ancient Buddhist text, the Anguttara Nikaya (2,38), Buddha himself says:

> Just as a blue, red or white lotus, although born in the water, grown up in the water, when it reaches the surface, stands there unsoiled by the water—just so…although born in the world, grown up in the world, having overcome the world, I abide unsoiled by the world. Take it that I am Buddha.…[3]

In other words, by attaining *nibbana*, Buddha himself reached a level beyond the mundane world: he had become transcendent and Buddhists initially refused to depict him as a result. It was more than 400 years before the first images were produced. The attitude of the Buddhists was the same as the attitude of the devotees of the gods of the Vedas who were not represented by images either—a point of view not very different from the position of the Jews who refused to make images of JHWH. Christians and Muslims extended the refusal to depict transcendence to the person who in their view had a very special relationship with God, i.e. Jesus and Muhammad respectively. Moreover, the great majority of Christians believed that Jesus himself was God as well.

Nonetheless, a large group of believers did not have any problem with depictions and images of their God. These people were certainly present in Hinduism, where many of them even saw a real and physical presence of God in these images. The worship of the divine images was, moreover, dominated by the concept of *darshan*, the act in which not only the worshipper sees the deity but the deity sees the worshipper as well. Such contact is usually very auspicious. After Buddha images were accepted by the Buddhists, Buddhism also included adherents who did not find images problematic, for Buddha images are now found in the gardens, homes and sacred places all over the Buddhist world. In the 19th century it had, in fact, become almost inconceivable that there was a time that any representation of the Enlightened One had been forbidden. Something similar occurred in Christianity. The first depictions of Jesus appeared in the 3rd century CE. Nonetheless, Christianity always included a large group of believers who declined any depiction of their Lord. The Orthodox only permitted icons, which meant that they

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[2] See Chapter Four, p. 134.
[3] Conze: 105.

submitted their depictions of Jesus to very strict rules, and 19th-century Protestantism included a large number who rejected all images of Jesus. Even in Islam, images of the Prophet were not unknown, although only in some specific movements and in some special regions.

Nonetheless, the conclusion is justified that before the introduction of film at the end of the 19th century all religions included both those who believed that it was impossible to depict transcendence and those individuals who had had the most intense contact with it, and those who did not have any problem with these images—even more, they appreciated, admired, adored and, as in the case of a great number of Hindus, even worshipped them, expecting to be blessed through this worship. The introduction of film only intensified their enthusiasm. They were fond of watching films that depicted the figures they worshipped. Both the first Jesus films and the first mythologicals representing Hindu gods, including Rama, were huge box-office successes.

In Christianity, it was 15 years before the pope, in 1912, forbade the showing of passion films in Roman Catholic churches. At the same time, there were many priests, particularly missionaries, who were eager to use the very same films in their missionary work. There were two schools of thought in Christianity from the beginning of the film era: those who supported the new developments that resulted from the new cinematic inventions and those who opposed them. Over the course of time the first group gained the upper hand. In the 1930s Pope Pius XI already permitted Catholics to watch any movie that did not offend the beliefs and customs of Christianity. In 1958 Pope Pius XII even recommended a film about Jesus, LOS MISTERIOS DEL ROSARIO, whereas in 1977 Pope Paul VI recommended JESUS OF NAZARETH. The definitive victory for those Christians with a positive attitude towards representing Jesus in film came in 1979, when a group of conservative Protestants produced JESUS for use in their evangelism work. The conclusion is therefore justified that, after 82 years, almost all Christians accepted the new medium as a means for propagating their faith. This was, in fact, a breakthrough, since Christianity always traditionally included a group that did not have any problem with depicting Jesus Christ as well as a group that opposed it. But it is necessary to realize that the change in attitude among those who opposed depicting of Jesus was related to JESUS, a Jesus film that followed the text of the gospel of Luke meticulously. In other words, depicting Jesus was allowed, but only if it happened in close correspondence with the Bible. The campaigns against Scorcese's LAST TEMPTATION make clear that the

same Christians could oppose other Jesus pictures that, in their view, deviated too far from the text of the New Testament. The concession of these Protestants was not without restrictions.

The Eastern Orthodox occupy a special position. Officially, they approve only of depicting Jesus in certain icons, but there are, as far as I know, no statements made by Orthodox leaders prohibiting people from watching Jesus films. Nonetheless, it remains possible, of course, that many of them reject the idea of making a film about Jesus.

Hinduism seems to be the sole religion that almost completely embraces the filming of its religious figures. For many years this business was the mainstay of the Indian film industry. In the eyes of many devout Hindus, films even became part of rituals: they approached the motion pictures in the same way they approached the images in their homes and temples, while the cinematic narratives were regarded as holy stories narrating the events that were part of the histories of the deities who were worshipped. For that reason, it comes as no surprise that many Brahmans played prominent roles as filmmakers and directors. Nonetheless, there are also many Hindus who claim that those with deeper insight will understand that the absolute God will always transcend all depictions, which in their view means that it is impossible to portray real transcendence. For the great majority of the Hindus, however, the gods and semi-gods in the motion pictures are representations of the divine on the same level as Jesus and Buddha, or have the same close relationship with God that Muhammad does.

In comparison to the films about Jesus and of Rama, the number of Buddha films is significantly smaller. This, combined with the resistance felt in Buddhist countries against movies that depict the Enlightened One, underscores how much hesitation the Buddhists showed towards films of the great figure who inspired them.

It was Hindus and Westerners who made nearly all the films about Buddha. Nonetheless, there were three films produced in Japan and Korea, both countries with a large Buddhist population, but it is not clear if those involved with these films were Buddhists themselves. Moreover, these pictures did not become box-office successes. Successful Buddha films were successful in India and in the so-called 'Western countries' in Europe, North America and Australia. As a matter of fact, the attitude of the Buddhists is a reminder of the fact that it was more than 400 years before the first stone images of Buddha were made.

Moustapha Akkad, the producer of The Message, the first and only feature film about Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, had to overcome

a great deal of resistance before he could start the production of his film. The Prophet was not to appear on-screen at all. Then Akkad found out that the consent he had obtained had been withdrawn, since his solution that the audience see parts of his film through the eyes of the Apostle could not be approved because this put the spectator in Muhammad's position. It is important to realize, however, that Akkad made a substantial concession, since THE MESSAGE presented a narrative of Muhammad's life that did not depict the Prophet.

None of the religions discussed in the present study offered as much resistance as Islam. It is well known that the religious authorities of Islam are strictly against any depiction of the Apostle, even though it is stressed time and again that he is simply an ordinary man. Even the filming of his wives and the four rightly guided caliphs is prohibited, and as of 2004 the Companions of the Prophet may not be depicted either. The only opening these authorities gave was to represent Muhammad in an animation film in the same way as in THE MESSAGE. The Muslim authorities in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon were more liberal, however. They were even positive about THE MESSAGE and gave permission to sell DVDS of the film in the proximity of the city's principal mosque.

Nonetheless, the notion of an Islamic prohibition against all images of the Prophet needs modification. The early Islamic tradition itself already spoke about the availability of images of Muhammad among prominent Christians. In the 13th century the Muslims themselves made pictures and again in the 19th and 20th centuries. So, the prohibition against depicting the Apostle is not as absolute as many Muslim religious authorities proclaim. Many Muslims feel the need for or—perhaps better—some curiosity regarding depictions of Muhammad and for that reason the authorities turn a blind eye to them in some regions, one of which is a country with one of the strictest varieties of Islam. Therefore, the conclusion is justified that Islam also includes believers who absolutely reject any depiction of its founder as well as believers—however few—who permit them.

For that reason, the conclusion may be drawn that all great religions discussed in the present study include both people who oppose depiction of the most sacred figures of their own religion and those who support it. Hindus embraced the new invention and the most devout among them integrated it into their rituals. Christians overcame their resistance and the most conservative ones began using the new medium for their evangelism work. Resistance never completely disappeared

from among the Buddhists, although many of them do not have any problem with Buddha films. Resistance remains the greatest in Islam, but even in this religion there are those who appreciate the new medium as well as Mustafa Akkad's depiction in his The Message. Therefore, the overall conclusion is that the depiction of their most sacred figure in film has become part of all these great religions, although resistance is most explicit in Islam. It has to be realized, however, that The Message is an unusual film, since the Prophet is not represented. Akkad had to submit to the restrictions of the highest religious authorities of his religion. All this reveals what happened during the first century after the invention of film. The religious authorities lost the first battle: they were not able to prevent ordinary believers of their own religion from watching films of the figures so closely related to their God. But they did win the second battle.

The previous chapters demonstrate that, of the pictures discussed in this study, the box-office successes are those films that present a portrayal that almost always conforms to the requirements of the most important religious authorities. The most successful Jesus biopics are those portraying him in his traditional appearance while at the same time presenting him as the Son of God, although always with some emphasis on his being the suffering servant. Features that presented another view of Jesus, such as The Last Temptation, often became controversial and therefore did not become box-office successes—in many cases after campaigns resulting from their rejection by certain religious authorities. So, it comes as no surprise that quite a number of filmmakers cautiously attempted to get the support of the leaders of the mainline churches. This even applies to the two Indian Jesus films. The one that has become most successful and was seen by the largest audience is Karuna Mayudu, which is also the biopic most in agreement with the doctrine of the church. In Hinduism the most successful pictures also offer a visually and theologically traditional portrait of Rama, although in this religion the room for some criticism seems to be larger, even if Rama turns out again in the end to be the omnipotent God. We are still waiting for a Buddhist film about Buddha. The restrictions placed on Akkad's Message also reveal how influential the higher religious authorities of Islam are.

These authorities were able to win the second battle because of their influence on the audience or, to be more accurate, on that segment of the spectators who belonged to the same religious tradition. At the same

time, the fact that the highest religious authorities in Islam were not able to prevent people from going to see Akkad's MESSAGE in Cameroon makes clear that their authority is not unlimited.

Chapter One mentioned five factors that play a prominent part in the production of films: the filmmakers, the religious authorities, the investors, the audience and the technical possibilities. The technical possibilities only expanded and multiplied in the history of film. The influence of the religious authorities was great and even decisive with regard to the content of the biopics of the religious figures discussed in the present study—but only if they were prepared to give some space to the audience. Purely forbidding people to see the films proved to be impossible. The investors took most into account what they expected the audiences would accept, since that was their only chance to earn their money back, whereas the filmmakers were often dependent on the willingness of the investors to support their plans. So, the conclusion is not unjustified that the audience holds the key position and that the religious authorities were capable of exerting influence only if they were willing to take this into consideration.

Since the American film industry was the largest during almost the whole 20th century, it goes without saying that the religious authorities of the churches in the United States were most influential. The religion with the largest number of adherents in the United States is still Christianity. Thus, their authority had to do particularly with Jesus biopics. It is obvious that they were not interested in devising standards for films about Rama, Buddha or Muhammad. Sometimes, it seems that this situation gave filmmakers from outside the United States more freedom when making Jesus pictures. Pasolini did not need to take into account the Jewish lobby that was so strong in the United States. Nonetheless, this freedom was limited as well, since most of these producers and directors also lived in countries with predominantly Christian populations. The Indian film industry has now become the largest, but this scarcely affects this situation, since India is predominantly Hindu and Hindu authorities are not interested in Jesus films. The American film industry is still the largest in the Christian world, so the religious authorities in the United States are still very influential. But, as stated above, this influence is not without its limits.

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Al-Risalah (Moustapha Akkad, 1976)
Bharat Milap (Vijay J. Bhatt, 1942)
Buddha (G. Adi Sheshagiri Rao, 1995)
Color of the Cross (Jean-Claude LaMarre, 2006)
Deewaar (Yash Chopra, 1975)
From the Manger to the Cross (Sidney Olcott, 1912)
Godspell (David Greene, 1973)
Gotama the Buddha (Bimal Roy, 1957)
Il Vangelo secondo Matteo (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964)
Il Messia (Roberto Rosselini, 1976)
Jesus Christ Superstar (Norman Jewison, 1973)
Jésus de Montréal (Denys Arcand, 1989)
Jesus of Nazareth (Franco Zeffirelli, 1977)
Jezile (Mark Donford-May, 2006)
Karuna Mayudu (Vijaya Chander, 1978)
King of Kings (Nicolas Ray, 1961)
Lanka Dahan (Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, 1917)
La Vie de Bouddha (Martin Meissonnier, 2001)
Matthew (Robert Marcarelli, 1993)
Opera Jawa (Garin Nugroho, 2006)
Raja Harischandra (Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, 1913)
Ramayan (Ramanand Sagar, 1986–1988)
Ram Rajya (Vijay J. Bhatt, 1943)
Shanti Sandesham (P. Chandrasekhar Reddy, 2004)
Son of Man (Dennis Potter, 1969)
Sampoorna Ramayan (Babubhai Mistri, 1961)
Tathagata Buddha (K. Raja Sekhar, 2008)
The Gospel of John (Philippe Saville, 2003)
The Greatest Story Ever Told (George Stevens, 1965)
The Jesus Film (originally entitled Jesus, John Heyman, 1979)
The King of Kings (Cecil B. DeMille, 1927)
The Last Emperor (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987)
The Last Temptation of Christ (Martin Scorcese, 1988)
The Life and the Passion of Jesus Christ (Ferdinand Zecca and Lucien Nonguet, first version 1902; second version 1905)
The Light of Asia (Franz Osten, 1925)
The Little Buddha (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1993)
The Mahabharata (Peter Brook, 1989)
The Message (Moustapha Akkad, 1976)
The Passion of the Christ (Mel Gibson, 2004)
The Ten Commandments (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956)

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